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# **Life Lessons from the Great Myths**

**J. Rufus Fears, Ph.D.**

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Professor Fears has been a Danforth Fellow, a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, and a Harvard Prize Fellow. He has been a fellow of the American Academy in Rome and the Guggenheim Foundation, and he has twice been a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Germany. Professor Fears's research has been supported by grants from the American Philosophical Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Zarrow Foundation, and the Kerr Foundation. He has been a distinguished visiting professor and Scholar-in-Residence at numerous institutions, including Washington and Lee University, Miami University, and the Franz Doelger-Institut at the University of Bonn. Professor Fears is

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Professor Fears's teaching has been the subject of numerous feature articles, and he has been recognized for teaching excellence on more than 25 occasions. In 1996, 1999, and again in 2000, students chose him as the University of Oklahoma Professor of the Year. In 2003, he received the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) Great Plains Region Award for Excellence in Teaching. UCEA is the national association for colleges and universities with continuing education programs. In 2005, Professor Fears received the National Award for Teaching Excellence from UCEA, which cited "his outstanding teaching, imaginative scholarship, and contribution to continuing education." Also in 2005, Professor Fears received the Excellence in Teaching Award from the Classical Association of the Middle West and South and was named Most Inspiring Professor by University of Oklahoma students. In 2006, the state-wide Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence awarded him its Medal for Excellence in College and University Teaching. In 2010, Professor Fears was recognized for his teaching and research by being named Academic Fellow of the Academy for Leadership and Liberty at Oklahoma Christian University.

Professor Fears is very active in speaking to broader audiences about the lessons of history for our own day. He has appeared regularly on national talk radio, and interviews with him have been carried in newspapers and television across the country. He leads annual study trips to historical sites in Europe and America.

*Life Lessons from the Great Myths* is the ninth course Professor Fears has produced with The Great Courses. His other courses are *A History of Freedom*; *Famous Greeks*; *Famous Romans*; *Churchill*; *Books That Have Made History*; *Books That Can Change Your Life*; *The Wisdom of History*; *Life Lessons from the Great Books*; and *The World Was Never the Same: Events That Changed History*. ■

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# Life Lessons from the Great Myths

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## Scope:

All too often, we have a tendency to equate the word “myth” with “falsehood.” But in truth, many of the world’s greatest mythological stories contain a kernel of historical truth. Perhaps more importantly, they convey universal truths—that is, they are the vehicle by which cultures throughout human history have passed their most important values and beliefs on to future generations. This course, therefore, explores the relationship between history and mythology. Our goal is to understand how and why certain historical events are expanded and transformed into tales of legendary proportions and what we can learn from these tales.

We will begin with a detailed analysis of one of the world’s greatest myths and the historical kernel that lies at the heart of that myth: the Trojan War. It is a perfect case study in the intersection of history and myth, coming down to us through a great work of literature (Homer’s *Illiad*) but also supported by remarkable archaeological finds. It also demonstrates many of the themes we will encounter again and again: the qualities of a hero, the dangers of *hybris*, the relationship between humans and the divine, and the inevitability of death.

Next we will look at the myths associated with the ancient city-state of Athens, particularly the myths of Theseus and Oedipus. We will look at what we can learn from these stories about the history and values of the Bronze Age Mediterranean, as well as which of the values of the world’s first true democracy these myths transmitted to America’s founders and the other democratic nations of the modern West.

We will diverge briefly to look at myths that truly are myths in the popular sense—ones that have no historical kernel, including some traditional creation stories and the story of Atlantis. We will consider what gives these ahistorical myths their staying power and what, if any, value they have for us today.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* leads us east to ancient Mesopotamia, where we will find many of the same themes of heroism, glory, and death we found in the myths of Greece. The historical kernel of Gilgamesh is one of the most transformational events in history: the birth of civilization in the Middle East. This will lead us, chronologically and geographically, to the founding myth of the state of Israel, the book of Exodus. The Middle East was the crucible of the West's three great religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as well as the crucible of conflicts from the dawn of civilization to the present day. We will therefore consider what truths we can learn about these eternal conflicts from these myths.

Arguably, the early Roman Empire was the greatest civilization that the West ever produced. That civilization's founding myths—the *Aeneid* and the myth of Romulus and Remus—demonstrate the reverence that the Roman peoples felt for the culture of their Greek neighbors, as well as the sense of destiny they invested in their first emperor, Augustus, as the man who would put right what had once gone wrong.

The achievements of Alexander the Great occurred in the full light of history, yet even in his own lifetime, his deeds were embellished by myth. He will be our first case study in how and why verifiable historical fact becomes glamorized and magnified into mythology, but he will not be the last.

We then move from the Mediterranean northward to consider the two most important myths produced in the British Isles: *Beowulf* and the legends of King Arthur. These give us deep historical insight into the Germanic and Norman civilizations, respectively, that ruled England in the Middle Ages and show us how Christianity transformed the warrior values of the classical world. We will also see how *Beowulf*'s close cousins, the Norse sagas, inspired one extraordinary Norwegian couple to rediscover lost truths about America's precolonial history.

Our survey of myth would be incomplete without acknowledging how kernels of truth can be twisted to terrible ends. We will study two such kernels: the 14<sup>th</sup> century Battle of Kosovo, which was used as an excuse for 20<sup>th</sup> century genocide, and the *Commentaries* of Julius Caesar, and the tragedies Napoleon Bonaparte wrought trying and failing to live up to his

idol. In a similar vein, we will consider how the decisions of these and other great men have turned the tides of history.

Finally, we will cross the Atlantic and consider the myths of America, particularly the myths of the boundless frontier that still inform the American identity. From Davy Crockett to Ronald Reagan, from dime novels to Hollywood blockbusters, we will look at how America defined, built, and spread its foundational myths and how these myths hearken back to the oldest legends of humankind. ■

# Heroes, History, and Myth

## Lecture 1

**W**e are accustomed to separating mythology from history. In ordinary language, when we say something is a myth, we mean it's not true. We're accustomed to thinking of history as facts, the way it really was. But in absolute sense, there is no dichotomy between mythology and history.

The life stories of history's greatest heroes partake both of myth and history. From Alexander the Great to the marines on the beaches at Iwo Jima, even when their lives are lived in the full light of history, certain events become shrouded in myth.

### **The Purpose of Myth**

Myths are the means by which all societies, in all times, have conveyed their highest truths—their values, hopes, aspirations, and disappointments. One of the fundamental themes of this course is that many of the great myths of world history have a historical kernel. But we also recognize that it is the nature of a hero to take on other myths. Stories accrue to them. Another fundamental thesis is that many of the greatest myths are transformed into great books by creative artists. Our goal therefore is to understand this mythopoetic imagination, this desire to explain the world in this way.

Tracing the historical kernel of myths can be tricky, and even events that occur in the full light of history can take on the overtones of being mythological. Therefore, we will debate whether every individual story has to be factual to be “true” or whether a myth—a story that cannot be documented—is a valid way to understand the greatness of a hero.

### **George Washington and the Power of Prayer**

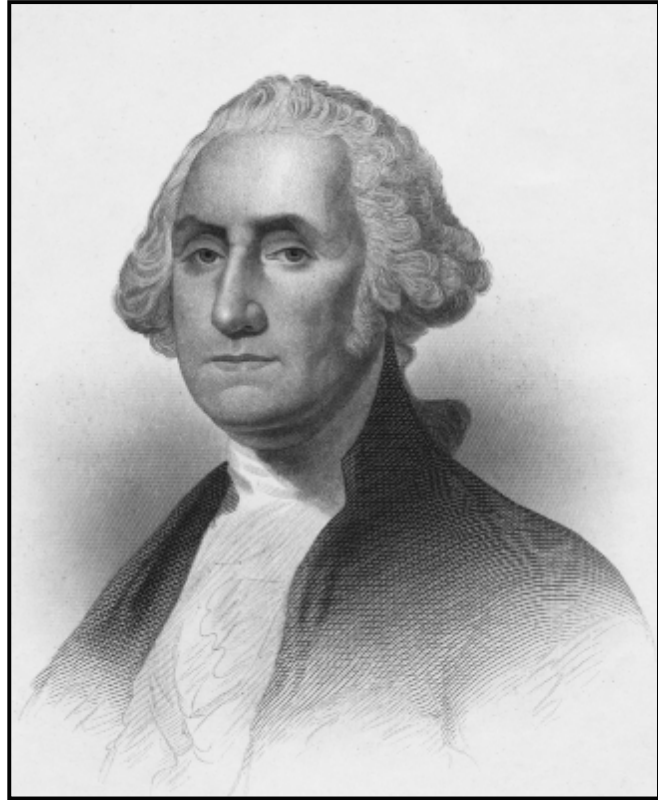
Let's begin with two emblematic myths from American history, which illustrate what so many Americans hold to be the higher truth about their country: that America was chosen by God to bring freedom to the world.

In January 1778, **George Washington**'s Continental Army troops were stationed at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The British were quartered only a few miles away at Philadelphia, but Washington was confident they wouldn't attack. The real danger lay in the harsh, bitter winter conditions and the desperate condition of his troops. Their coats were threadbare; many of them had no shoes. They were living on dried peas and salt pork. Their bodies were ravaged by dysentery and influenza.

In 1878, a small journal called the *Aldine Press* published a story about Washington at Valley Forge. According to the author, a former U.S. Army pension agent who had heard many stories about the war from veterans he met in his work, on January 17, 1778, General Peter Muhlenberg and the Marquis de Lafayette went to a barn in the army camp to look at Lafayette's new horse.

When they opened the barn door, they found Washington there on his knees, so deep in prayer that he was unaware of their presence, despite the blast of cold air they brought with them. They closed the door and left Washington to his devotions.

A remarkably similar story is found in the diary of the Reverend Nathaniel Snowden, which is in the collection of the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Snowden records a discussion with a Quaker friend named Isaac Potts. It was Potts' house where George Washington had his headquarters during the time at Valley Forge. Potts was a rare Whig (that is, supporter of the Revolution) among his Quaker brethren, and he told Snowden the story of his conversion to the revolutionary cause. Apparently, he too witnessed Washington on



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**The myths surrounding Washington at Gettysburg point to the fact of the importance of faith in his life.**

his knees in the depths of prayer, immune to all distraction, this time in a meadow on his property. Potts said that he realized at that moment that, with

**We might, at this distance, let the similarities persuade us that one or both stories are myths. ... But consider instead that what they have in common might point to a higher truth.**

a general like Washington who had such a deep belief in God, the Continental Army could not lose.

So, two quite similar stories—suspiciously similar. We might, at this distance, let the similarities persuade us that one or both stories are myths—in the sense of not being true. But consider instead that what they have in common might

point to a higher truth: George Washington was a deeply religious man. We know from much more reliable, firsthand records that Washington believed God had put him in his position at the head of the army and that God would ultimately see the colonists through to victory. American freedom and faith in God were utterly entwined in Washington's world. Even to the staunchest skeptic, these two myths—in the sense of stories that convey a higher truth—say something about the role of religious faith in the founding of the United States of America.

### **The Flags of Iwo Jima**

Between February 19 and February 23, 1945, the tiny island of Iwo Jima was soaked in blood as three American marine divisions struggled to secure it for the Allied forces. Thousands of young Americans died there to secure an air base from which the Japanese home islands could be attacked. The Japanese had allowed the marines to land, then opened fire on the marines from tunnels dug deep in the earth. The marines spent four deadly days digging them out.

One of the last parts of the island to be secured was Mount Suribachi. When the task was done, Commander Chandler Johnson ordered his men to raise a flag at the summit. And so Lieutenant Harold Schrier, Corporal “Chuck” Charles Lindbergh, Sergeant Ernest Thomas, Sergeant Henry “Hank” Hansen, Private Gene Marshall, and Private James Michael, carried the flag up, attached it to a bit of broken water pipe, and raised it to the sound

of horns and cheers from all over the island. The moment was caught by a photographer from *Leatherneck Magazine*, Lewis Lowery.

Not the name you're familiar with? Here's why. Shortly after the flag was raised, the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, landed on Iwo Jima. Recognizing the importance of the moment, he demanded the flag as a souvenir. Commander Johnson, on receiving this order, was outraged; the flag belonged to his battalion. So he ordered the first flag taken down and hidden and a second, larger flag raised. That one could go to Secretary Forrestal.

A famous freelance photographer named Joseph Rosenthal was also on Iwo Jima but had missed the first flag raising. As it happened, he climbed Mount Suribachi anyway to take some other photos and was there when the second flag was raised. Within 17½ hours, he had wired the photo to New York, and the next day it made headlines all over the United States. It is Rosenthal's photograph, not Lowery's, that went down in history.

So, does it matter? What is the greater truth of the flag raising on Iwo Jima? Is it about the individual men who carried the flag—either flag—up that slope? Is it about which flag flew first? About which photograph is the “real” one? In fact, it is about something larger—the willingness of thousands of Americans, at Iwo Jima and all over the world, in that war and in the wars before and since—to sacrifice their lives for their country and for the freedom of people all over the world. ■

### Name to Know

**Washington, George** (1732–1799): American soldier and statesman and first president of the United States of America (1789–1797). Washington proved his bravery and capability as a soldier during the French and Indian War (1756–1763). His ability as a surveyor and farmer, as well as his marriage, made Washington, at the outbreak of the Revolution, one of the wealthiest men in America. Like other wealthy patriots, Washington had far more to lose than to gain materially by the Revolution. He chose, however, to follow his honor, conscience, and love of liberty. His skills as a general have been much underrated. His ability in tactics, strategy, logistics, and

battlefield command led the Continental Army to victory. His sense of public duty guided him to assume a critical role in framing the Constitution and to serve as president. As president, he established precedents that set a course of liberty under law for the new republic.

### Suggested Reading

Bradley, *Flags of Our Fathers*.

Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington*.

Novak and Novak, *Washington's God*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Before you began this course, what was your understanding of the meaning of “mythology”?
2. Creation myths are often regarded as having no historical kernel. Do you agree with this view? What other sorts of myths are regarded this way?



# The Myth of Troy

## Lecture 2

**H**ow do historical events become so prominent in the mind of contemporaries and posterity that they take on mythic proportions? World War II shows us how myth and history can be combined: It was the deadliest and, to that time, the best documented war in history. Even so, basic facts remain disputed, and individual actors take on mythic proportions.

In this lecture, let's look at what we know about a different war, an ancient war, instead. Let's look at the earliest war that we know about in any detail: The Trojan War. I believe that the Trojan War was a real historical event, that Achilles was as real as George Patton. The Trojan War shows us how kernels of history can turn into myths and how great myths lead to great books—in this case, **Homer's** *Iliad*.

### **The Seed of Discord**

The Trojan War (c. 1250s B.C.) was in essence a 10-year siege of the mighty walled city of Troy, which was situated on the Hellespont, the strait where Europe meets Asia. This alone reminds us that the Middle East, from the earliest recorded history to the present day, has been the crucible of conflict and the graveyard of empires. More wars have been fought in the Middle East than anywhere else in the world.

Before the war began, a Trojan prince named Paris (sometimes called Alexander) was living the life of a shepherd, far from the court. His father, King Priam, had received an oracle that said Paris would be the destruction of Troy. Whether or not we believe in oracles or prophecy, the ancient Greeks certainly did; Paris's banishment from his home is utterly plausible.

The next part of the story takes place among the gods, whom the Greeks believed had human foibles and an interest in human affairs. The gods of Mount Olympus threw a festival and did not invite the goddess of discord. Offended (and true to her nature), the goddess rolled into the festival hall a golden apple on which was written, "To the fairest." All the goddesses

squabbled over it, but the fight finally came down to three: Athena, goddess of wisdom; Hera, wife of Zeus; and Aphrodite, goddess of love. They asked Zeus to settle the dispute, but he delegated the job to a mortal—Paris.

So the three goddesses descended on Paris, and Paris makes his first crucial mistake: He has the outrageous arrogance (*hybris*, commonly spelled “hubris” in English) to accept the job. Each of the goddesses chooses to bribe their judge. Hera offers to make Paris the ruler of the world; Athena offers him eternal glory as history’s greatest general; and Aphrodite offers him the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris votes for Aphrodite.

### **The Prize and the Price**

True to her word, Aphrodite points Paris toward Helen, the queen of Sparta and wife of King Menelaus. Helen was so beautiful in her youth that all the kings of Greece had courted her. When she chose Menelaus, the kings of Greece swore an oath that if she were ever taken away from Menelaus they would unite to bring her back.

When Paris arrived in Sparta, Menelaus knew nothing of his intentions and welcomed him, as he would any visiting prince, with great hospitality. He was shocked when his guest and his wife ran off to Troy together, but not so shocked he couldn’t remember the other kings’ oaths. He summoned all armies and navies of Greece to bring Helen back, suggesting that the kidnap of Helen was only the first part of Troy’s plan to destroy Greece.

Odysseus, the wisest of the Greek kings, saw no reason to go to war—Helen clearly left of her own free will—but he reluctantly joined the campaign. Achilles, the mightiest of Greece’s warriors, wanted nothing to do with this preemptive war, but not because he feared death. In fact, he had every intention of dying young and gloriously in battle—just not for this frivolous cause. He, too, was eventually dragged along.

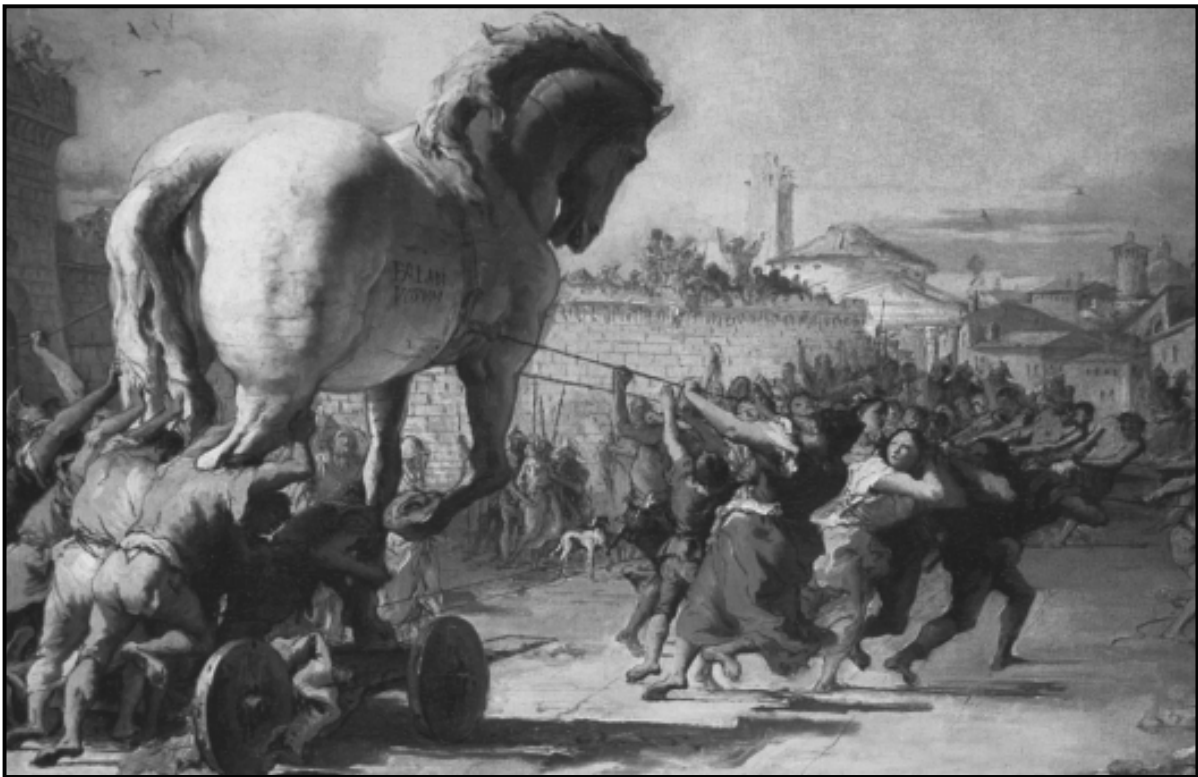
The Greek fleet assembled at the port of Aulis, but the winds refused to cooperate, keeping the ships trapped in the harbor. After days or weeks of waiting, the leaders finally consulted a soothsayer, who told them the wind was a punishment for their *hybris*. It seems that a few days before, the leaders were out hunting and allowed their dogs to kill a pregnant rabbit and

consume her unborn young. For this crime against the innocent, the gods demanded a sacrifice of innocent blood: They must sacrifice the daughter of King Agamemnon of Mycenae, Iphigenia.

Agamemnon has a choice: give up the war, or give up his daughter. He not only chooses to sacrifice his daughter for a chance at glory, he brings her to Aulis under false pretenses. She expects to be married to Achilles; instead, she is butchered like a hog. At the moment of her death, the winds shifted, and the fleet sailed for Troy.

### **The Trojan Horse**

Like so many countries over the centuries who have undertaken preemptive wars, the Greeks believed that striking first would lead to a short and glorious war. It did not. For 10 years, Greek soldiers died around the walls of Troy, not just from sword and spear but also from dysentery and fever. Achilles, tired of the futile fighting, withdrew his men for a time in protest. When he rejoined the war, he killed Troy's greatest warrior, Hector, but still the fighting raged on.



The story of the Trojan Horse warns us how easily the joy of victory can lead to the mistake of *hybris*.

Then one day in the tenth year of the war, the Trojans looked over their walls and saw no Greeks. The shoreline was empty. The tents were gone. They sent out scouts, who confirmed that it was no trick; the campfires were cold, and the seas were empty to the horizon. But there was one curious thing:

**Like so many countries over the centuries who have undertaken preemptive wars, the Greeks believed that striking first would lead to a short and glorious war. It did not.**

On the beach is an enormous wooden horse. What is it for? Soon, a battered Greek soldier appears on the beach saying that he has crucial news for the Trojans: They can become invincible.

Suspicious, they listen to his tale. His name is Sinon, and the Greeks had intended to sacrifice him to ensure good winds toward home, just as they had sacrificed Iphigenia to get to Troy. But Sinon escaped, albeit not unscathed, so the Greeks built this great wooden

horse as an offering, a sort of apology to Athena for giving up the fight. Athena looked on this gift and pledged that whichever nation possessed this wooden horse would never be conquered.

The Trojans, in their *hybris* at having “won” the war, took the horse inside the walls of Troy and immediately began to celebrate. They held a great feast, eating and drinking freely and, for the first time in 10 years, sleeping securely in their beds, knowing they were finally safe.

But the horse, as we know, was not an emblem of peace but of death. As the Trojans slept, the bravest of all Greece’s warriors, who had concealed themselves inside the horse, poured out of the horse’s belly and laid waste to Troy. They offered no mercy, no quarter. They burned the city, killed the men, and enslaved the women and children. Troy was utterly defeated.

### **The Lessons of War**

So what is the greater truth of this story? First, the Trojan War warns us of the dangers of preemptive war: Making war before it is necessary can lead to tragic mistakes. Troy also teaches us about the dangers of *hybris*—thinking you’re so wise, wanting greatness so badly that you will sacrifice even what

is dearest to you to achieve it. How many of us look on our past and realized that we have neglected what really mattered in pursuit of hollow glory? Finally, the story warns us that in war you must stay the course. In grasping for peace, the Trojans were destroyed. ■

### Name to Know

**Homer** (fl. 9<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.): Author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Very little is known about this greatest of ancient Greek poets. Claims abound as to his birthplace, but he was most likely from Smyrna, an area of western Anatolia (Turkey) south of Troy, or the island of Chios, just off the Anatolian coast; the details in the poems indicate familiarity with the geography around Troy and the western Aegean. The belief that he was blind is based on his name, which, depending on the language and dialect one consults, might be derived from the word for “blind,” but it also might mean “one who follows” (i.e., a wandering minstrel) or “he who fits the song together.” The quality and beauty of Homer’s language, as well as his detailed descriptions of the lifestyles of warriors and kings, imply that he was somehow connected with the Greek rulers of his day, perhaps as a court poet.

### Suggested Reading

Apollodorus, *Library*, XII–XIV.

Morford, *Classical Mythology*, p. 348–387.

### Questions to Consider

1. What do you learn about Agamemnon’s character from the decisions he makes?
2. In what sense can the roots of the Trojan War be traced back to the *hybris* of Paris, even before the abduction of Helen?

# Homer and Mythology

## Lecture 3

**T**he *Iliad* is the great book about the Trojan War. By “great book,” I mean one with a great theme, one written in noble language, and one that speaks across the ages. A great book should speak to you personally as well. The theme of the *Iliad* is the meaning of human life and the relationship between gods and humans—profound questions that are still with us today.

Any language, any dialect can be noble; what I mean by “noble language” is that the writing lifts your soul and gives a special meaning to the message. The Greek of Homer is a sudden emergence, like a blinding dawn, so beautiful that many Greeks memorize the whole of the *Iliad*. To the Greeks, the language of Homer was what the language of the King James Bible was to English-speaking peoples.

Noble language speaks across the ages, and that is most certainly true of Homer. From golden-age Athens to the Roman and Byzantine empires to the British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its words have been on the lips of every educated person. Unfortunately, sometimes I find that the *Iliad* no longer speaks to my students, whether they are senior citizens or undergraduates. They complain about the hard words and the references to other stories. But I believe if you open your heart and don’t allow yourself to be bogged down by mythological names you don’t know, the *Iliad* will speak to you about the meaning of life, the relationship between God and humans, and the question of free will versus fate.

### How the *Iliad* Came About

In the Greek heroic age there was a shared set of values based on war as the most noble of activities and on courage and honor as the sublime values of a warrior; honor was based on what other people thought about you—your reputation. I’m quite convinced that while the siege of Troy was underway, minstrels were already singing about the events of the day; when the war had come to an end, they elaborated these songs. By about 750 B.C., Homer—a supreme singer of tales—had put all this material together in

such an enchanting, fascinating fashion that it was taken down via the recent invention of writing and thus became the *Iliad*. The important point is that Homer was a real person and the *Iliad* had a single genius.

With the true genius of a poet, Homer understood that it was not his job to tell the whole story of the Trojan War. His goal was to distill the essence of why it was fought. He covers only 51 days of the tenth year of the war, from the moment when the great warrior Achilles came into conflict with the high king, Agamemnon. In refusing to fight, Achilles was defying the will of Zeus, which would eventually lead to the death of his own dearest friend.

The *Iliad* is a set of real insights into human nature, still of use today in the corporate and academic worlds. Agamemnon is that CEO who knows he's not the best man or woman for the job, feels threatened, and will attempt to humiliate and rid himself of anybody who is a potential threat.

### **The *Hybris* of Great Men**

The story begins with death—a plague among the Greek forces whose origin is once again *hybris*. The Greeks had taken as a hostage the daughter of a priest of Apollo; Agamemnon took her as a concubine. When the priest came to ransom his only child, Agamemnon refuses and publically humiliates the old man. So Apollo himself visits the camp to shoot the Greeks with the arrows of plague.

A soothsayer correctly pinpoints the cause of the plague, but Agamemnon refuses to believe it. He accuses Achilles of plotting against him and bribing the soothsayer, then says he'll only give the priest his daughter back if he,



**Mycenae's powerful kings were buried with golden masks—signs of wealth and *hybris*.**

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Agamemnon, can take Achilles's concubine for his own. Achilles threatens to kill him, but Athena appears and stops him. Achilles—who is nearly as insecure as Agamemnon—obeys but is angered and humiliated. So he says, in essence, take my girl, but lose my strength. He and his forces withdraw from the battle. This news emboldens the Trojans to attack, and a horrific battle is fought to a stalemate.

### A Warrior's Honor

The two sides then make a deal: settle the war through single combat between Menelaus and Paris. But Paris doesn't show up for the fight, instead

**Agamemnon is that CEO who knows he's not the best man or woman for the job, feels threatened, and will attempt to humiliate and rid himself of anybody who is a potential threat.**

lingering in his bedroom with Helen and insisting it's the will of the gods. Paris's brother Hector tells Paris that everyone thinks he's a coward; Paris replies that he doesn't care what others think of him.

Hector's wife, Andromache, suggests that Hector and Priam sit down with the Greek leaders and negotiate a peace, but Hector says this is impossible; honor is at stake, and besides, the Greeks would likely just

come back stronger and attack again. The only way to win the war is to win absolutely. Andromache then suggests that they take their son and flee the war, but again Hector refuses. Unlike Paris, he cares about his reputation as a warrior; he wants to be remembered as the noblest warrior of the age.

Hector returns to battle and leads a charge against the Greeks. The Greeks are so close to losing that Achilles best friend, Patroclus, begs Achilles to let him lead Achilles' men into battle. Achilles agrees, and Patroclus dons Achilles's armor to fool the Trojans. The Trojans are driven back, but Hector seeks out "Achilles" and kills him, taking the armor as a prize. Enraged, Achilles has new armor made and joins the battle himself.

The real Achilles now confronts Hector, and Hector is slain. Achilles takes his body, ties it to his chariot, and drives it around and around the walls



of Troy. Then he brings the body to his tent, hoping to watch it rot. Priam comes to Achilles and threatens to kill him; Achilles tells him to go ahead, as he has nothing left to live for. Instead, they share a meal, and Achilles proclaims a truce to allow the Trojans to give Hector a proper funeral.

### **The End**

The *Iliad* comes to an end with death; Hector's funeral rites end the poem. The message is that death will come to all, even the greatest of us. What matters, Homer tells us, is how we live our life in between—our reputations, our achievements, our legacy. Homer also tells us that the gods, like us, are bound by fate. Hector is fated to die at the hands of Achilles, and it is not for us to question the ways of Zeus. The beginning of wisdom, Homer tells us, is the fear of God. ■

### **Suggested Reading**

Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, p. 23–62.

Homer, *Iliad*.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. How do you define a great book?
2. Do you believe that any one list can be considered *the* list of great books?

# In Search of Historical Troy

## Lecture 4

**D**id the Trojan War really happen? If you asked that question at a university in 1850, your professor would have chuckled at your youthful naiveté. Of course the war wasn't real! You might as well go looking for Camelot. Not every myth has a historical kernel. But Troy does.

Thucydides, the Athenian historian of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., took Homer at his word and used Homer's descriptions of the war to argue that a global economy, advanced technology, and economic growth do not lead to peace but to ever larger wars. Another sharp-eyed gentleman, German businessman Heinrich Schliemann, believed the war was a real historical event, too. It became his life's work to show that the scholars were wrong, that Troy truly existed, and that Hector and Agamemnon were real figures of history.

### **The Man and His Dream**

Schliemann was born in 1822 in what was then Prussia. His father was a Lutheran pastor who was driven from his post for embezzlement. But he was a loving father and regularly read to little Heinrich, particularly from a book of world history. The story of Troy was Heinrich's favorite. Because of his father's money troubles, Schliemann was unable to attend the classical gymnasium and learn Latin and Greek; instead, he went to work as a stock boy in a grocery store.

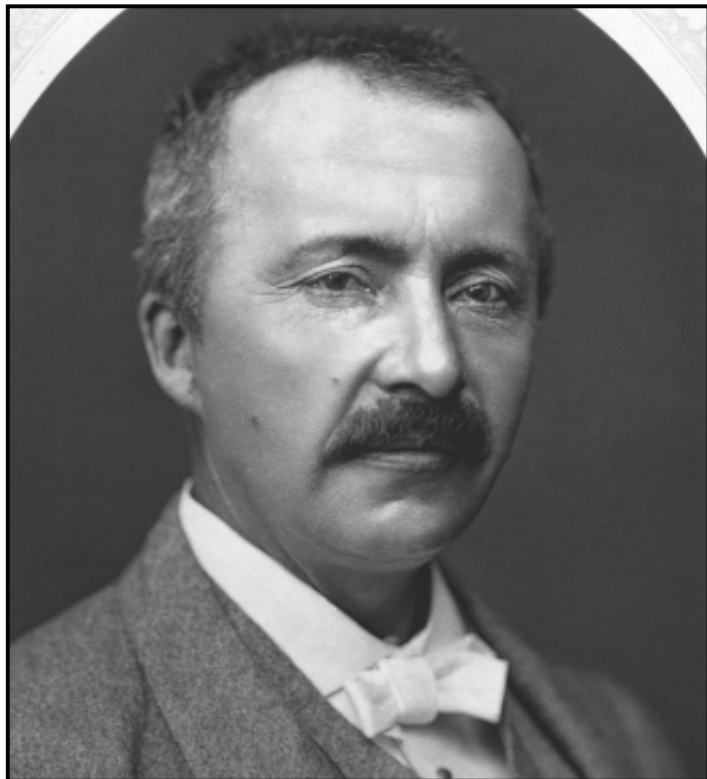
Schliemann realized that to follow his dream—to get a university education and find Troy—he needed money. He tried to seek his fortune in America, but a shipwreck landed him in Amsterdam, where he wrangled himself a position in an accounting house, despite having no formal education in accounting. He taught himself Russian and was thus able to discover fraud among the firm's Russian clients, earning himself a promotion and transfer to the Russian office. Meanwhile, Schliemann began speculating in the commodities market, becoming wealthy off the demands of the Crimean War.

Leaving his wife and children behind in Russia, Schliemann visited the United States and used his wealth to invest in the gold market in California. Once again he was successful. He moved to New York, claimed U.S. citizenship by way of his residence in California when it was granted statehood, then quickly moved to Indiana to obtain a divorce from his Russian wife. Six months later, Schliemann was single and seeking out a Greek wife. He wrote to the archbishop of Athens requesting his help in finding a suitable young lady, and the archbishop introduced him to fellow Homer lover and the love of his life, Sophia Engastromenos.

### **The Discovery of Troy—and More**

Schliemann's next problem was the Ottoman government of Turkey. They were highly corrupt and had no interest in Greek and Roman antiquities. The more eager Schliemann seemed to be to excavate, the less inclined the Turks were to give him a permit. It took a lot of his fortune to bribe them, but he did, and in 1870 he began his excavation at Troy. This was the dawn of archaeology as an academic discipline; most of Schliemann's predecessors had been little more than grave robbers. Schliemann, partly through trial and error and partly by taking advice from architects and engineers, developed scientific archaeology.

Schliemann's crew dug down as far as they could and found what would be called the First City of Troy. One of the first discoveries was a hoard of gold rings, bracelets, and a diadem; Schliemann was certain he had found Homer's Troy—"rich in gold." But in fact the Troy of the *Iliad* lay several layers up in what would be called Troy 7. That first



**Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890) was the most unlikely of archaeologists.**

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hoard was much older, as old as 2000 B.C. Schliemann smuggled the gold out of Turkey, infuriating the Turkish government, but he didn't care; he had his proof that Troy was real, and that meant Mycenae was, too. He was determined to find it.

Making use again, of profuse bribery, Schliemann began to excavate at Mycenae (although the Greeks assigned a "scientific advisor" to make sure Schliemann would not sneak off with any of their gold). In 1876, Schliemann came upon a shaft grave filled with magnificent royal golden death masks.

### **The Reality of Schliemann's Discoveries**

With the help of architect, Wilhelm Dörpfeld, Schliemann began to understand that the level where he had found his first gold was too old to

**Schliemann smuggled the gold out of Turkey, infuriating the Turkish government, but he didn't care; he had his proof that Troy was real.**

be Homer's city and that the golden masks he found at Mycenae were from an earlier era, too. But there was no disputing that Schliemann had uncovered a whole new world, the world of Bronze Age Greece, the heroic age. The archaeologists who have followed Schliemann, whether at Troy or at Mycenae, have all given the strongest

testimony to his accuracy, to his willingness to learn, and to his honesty. Despite Schliemann's lack of formal training and initial mistakes, the scholarly world owes him a great deal of gratitude.

Archaeologist Carl Blegen excavated at Troy from 1932 to 1938 and gave each level of the city firm dates based on the pottery found there. Professor George Mylonas, excavating on the acropolis at Mycenae in 1952, found a shaft grave even earlier than the grave found by Schliemann.

### **The Fate of Priam's Gold**

People tried to deny Schliemann's achievements and conclusions. But Schliemann had important friends in the German government, to whom he donated the golden treasures he had found.

The treasure of Priam thus was on display in the Museum of Prehistory of Berlin from the 1880s until World War II. The curator of the Museum of Prehistory, Wilhelm Unverzagt, arranged by 1944 to have the gold put in the basement of an antiaircraft tower built in the Berlin Zoo. He even slept there to make certain nothing happened to these precious objects. When Berlin fell, the Russians came into possession of the treasure and, unbeknownst to most of the scholarly world, took it to the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. There it was hidden for decades, while scholars began to doubt that the artifacts had ever existed.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, two Russian art historians, Konstantin Akinsha and Grigorii Kozlov, searched the museum's records and found the hiding place of the treasure, in the museum's basement. In 1993, Kozlov announced the treasure's rediscovery. The artifacts have been examined by leading archaeologists and pronounced to be authentic.

We've talked a lot about the lessons of Troy gleaned from Homer, but there's another lesson, this time from Schliemann: Follow your dreams, and never let anybody or anything dissuade you from your life's mission. ■

### Suggested Reading

Fitton, *The Discovery of the Greek Bronze Age*.

Trail, *Schliemann of Troy*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why did amateurs like Schliemann and Ventris succeed where the experts failed?
2. Why does it matter whether or not the Trojan War was a real historical event?

# Life Lessons from the Trojan War

## Lecture 5

**T**he Trojan War is one of the supreme myths of human history. To the classical Greeks, it was the supreme historical story conveying deep religious and moral values. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people still read the *Iliad*, and scholars still fight over the question of how exact its portrayal of the Trojan War is. What is the historical context of such a mighty struggle between the cities of Greece and the Trojans?

Many of the world's supreme myths have a historical kernel, and the Trojan War is one of those stories that grew out of real historical facts. Homer took a small episode from the war and distilled the very essence of the moral meaning of the *Iliad*: Why do we live our lives? What is our relationship to the gods? Have the gods foreordained everything, or do we have free will?

### **Was There a Trojan War?**

Heinrich Schliemann's excavations showed that Troy existed as a mighty city on the very spot where the Greeks and Romans thought it existed. He discovered that Troy was surrounded by powerful walls and that, in Mycenae, Tiryns, and other sites associated with the Trojan War on the Greek mainland, very similar walled cities existed that were rich in gold, warlike, and able to send a mighty armada against a city like Troy.

Even if there never had been a Trojan War and the *Iliad* were a complete romance made up entirely by Homer, the *Iliad* could still convey important moral truths. However, if we want to derive deeper truths about politics, human nature, and warfare, then it is very important to make certain that the Trojan War had a historical context—and it seems that it did. Archaeologists have determined that the city Schliemann believed was Troy was besieged, captured, and destroyed by human forces just around the time that the Greeks dated the Trojan War.

### **Troy at the Time of the Trojan War**

Troy at the time of the Trojan War sat at the point where Europe and Asia meet on the Hellespont. Ships would make stopovers at Troy; thus it was a

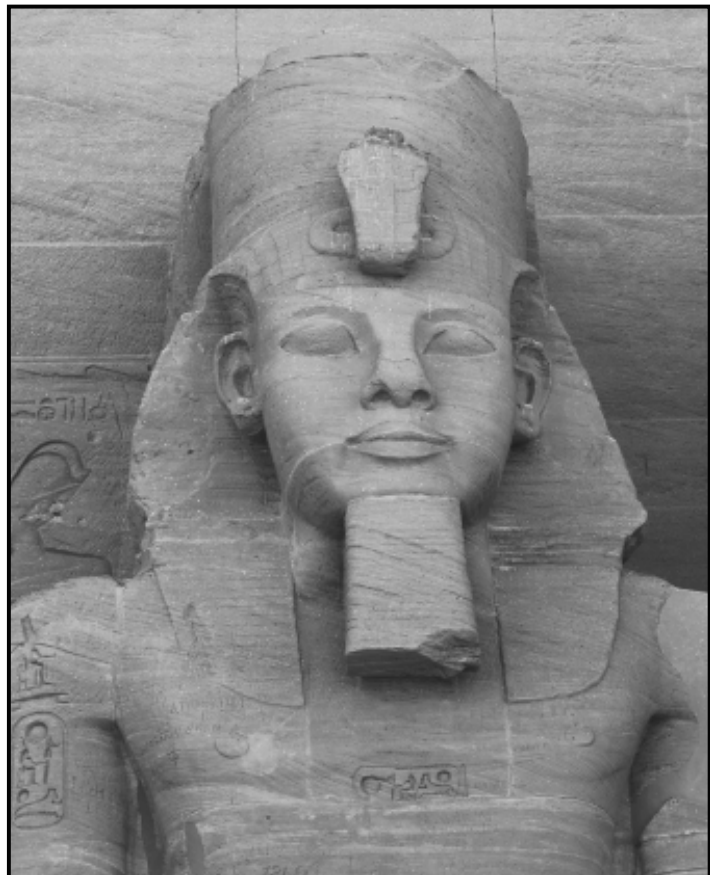
crucial mercantile locus. Troy was strategically situated, but records from outside of Greece put it into a deeper historical context. Around 1300 B.C., the civilization of the Hittites ruled over an area in the northwestern part of what is now Turkey, which the Greeks called Asia Minor. That area was designated as Truisa, which seemed to be the capital city of a larger area called Wilusija. Truisa is Troy, and Wilusija is its surrounding area, Ilium.

Troy was a very wealthy city that extended down the coast of Asia Minor, which was all considered by the Hittite king to be under his dominion. In 1274, convinced that the Hittite king Muwatallish was going to attack him, Ramses II attacked first and drove deep into Syria. At a place called Kadesh, a mighty battle was fought between the Hittites and the Egyptian troops.

### **The Aftermath of Kadesh**

Although Ramses claimed that a victory was won by his brave men, the Hittite king described how his men routed the Egyptians and how Ramses was driven back. In fact, the battle was probably a draw because a peace treaty resulted that divided Syria in half—the upper half belonging to the Hittites and the lower belonging to the Egyptians.

Both empires had stretched themselves to the limit. Egypt began to decline, and even more quickly after Kadesh, the Hittite Empire began to decline. By around 1260, whole areas of the Hittite Empire began to break away, and one of those areas was Wilusija with its capital of Truisa. In other words, Troy broke



**Ramses II's preemptive war against the Hittites set Troy on the path to war with Greece.**

away and made itself the leader of a confederation that spanned the coast of Asia Minor.

### **Into the Power Vacuum**

The two superpowers of 1300 B.C., Egypt and the Hittite Empire, therefore became weak. Within that vacuum, both Troy and the Achaeans tried to seize power. The Achaeans wanted the rich city of Troy for the wealth that

was already there, as well as for its strategic position—so that they could dominate the major trade route from the Mediterranean into the Black Sea.

**Troy broke away and made itself the leader of a confederation that spanned the coast of Asia Minor.**

For about a century, the Hittite Empire had been able to dominate this region because they had a

monopoly on iron—the most precious item at the time. They desired the ore itself, but they also smelted it down to make weapons. When the Hittite empire began to collapse, there was an enormous scramble to gain that natural resource, which was located in an area where a great deal of gold could also be found.

The historical context for the Trojan War is a very real one. It is also one that we still see today, a preemptive war launched by the Greeks against Troy and with the goal by both Troy and the Greeks of gaining the natural resources of the Middle East—in this case, not oil but iron (and gold). The scramble for the natural resources, then as now, set the historical context for a mighty war. ■

### **Suggested Reading**

Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad*.

Tolstikov, *Gold of Troy*.

Wood, *Trojan War*.



## Questions to Consider

1. Higher truths can include political lessons. Why can we reasonably call the Middle East “the crucible of conflict and the graveyard of empires”?
2. What does the Trojan War teach us about the wisdom of preemptive war?

# Jason and the Golden Fleece

## Lecture 6

One of the most remarkable aspects of the *Iliad* is how little of the magical, the monstrous, it contains. Homer's other great epic, the *Odyssey*, is quite different in that respect; it is essentially a hero's quest. The story of Jason and the Argonauts, for the Greeks and for the Romans, was the supreme example of a quest myth.

### Who Was Jason?

We do not have a Homer to sing of Jason, whose story takes place about a century before the Trojan War at the height of Mycenaean civilization, but we know Jason's story in great detail. He was the son of the king of Iolcos, one of the northernmost cities in Greece. It has a fine harbor, and its winds blow almost constantly toward the Black Sea. Jason's father was dethroned by his half-brother, Jason's evil uncle, Pelias. Jason's mother thus sent him to be educated by the centaur Chiron—the first magical element of this quest myth.

Chiron taught Jason how to read, write, and play music, the pillars of a Greek education. Jason returned to Iolcos at the age of 20 to reclaim his throne. From his earliest days, Jason was a special favorite of the goddess Hera. The idea of a god or goddess choosing a hero is fundamental to Greek mythology. Hera helps Jason in any way she can.

Pelias, meanwhile, has been told by an oracle to be wary of a man who arrives in Iolcos wearing only one sandal. Of course, Jason loses a sandal on his way to Iolcos while rescuing an old lady from drowning in a river. The lady is in fact Hera in disguise; this is also a common theme in mythology—you help an elderly person, and he or she turns out to be divine. Hera tells Jason of the quest he will have to undertake and gives him the courage to undertake it.

When Jason arrives in Iolcos, Pelias offers him his rightful throne—on one condition. He must prove his leadership skills to the people by going on a quest for the Golden Fleece.

## **The Legend of the Golden Fleece**

The story of the Golden Fleece involves another evil relative who seems to be a stock character in folklore, the evil stepmother. A woman named Ino was planning to sacrifice her two stepchildren, Phrixus and Helle. Zeus sent a flying golden ram to snatch them up and carry them away, but during their flight, Helle lost her grip and fell; the spot where she landed is now called the Hellespont. Phrixus was carried all the way to Colchis, on the far shores of the Black Sea. The golden ram was then sacrificed, and its fleece was laid on a great tree guarded by a great serpent, or dragon.

Jason accepts Pelias's challenge. He has a ship built, the *Argo*, and recruits the greatest heroes from all over Greece to sail with him: the Sons of the North Wind; Castor and Pollux; Heracles; and Theseus. As the tale was told throughout the centuries, almost every city in Greece claimed a hero among the Argonauts.

## **The Voyage of the *Argo***

In terms of geography, the Argonauts' voyage into the Black Sea proceeds logically. Their first stop was the island of Limnos, where due to a curse from Aphrodite, the women had previously murdered all the men. The Argonauts spent a year there and sired children with Limnos's women—Jason with their queen—then continued on their quest. This is another common feature of the hero's tale: Duty calls them away from their women.

Heracles has brought his beloved young friend Hylas on the journey, but on a stop for water, Hylas is kidnapped by the nymphs of a spring. Heracles stays behind on the little island to find his friend and thus disappears from the tale of the Argonauts.

On they sail until they come to a local bully, Amycus. Much of mythology deals with bullies, and as with bullies down to this day, the only course of action is to beat them into submission. Pollox beats Amycus to death.

In a desolate land, they meet Phineas, a once-powerful king beloved by Zeus. Zeus had given him the gift of prophecy, but another lesson from mythology is a god's love can be a curse. Zeus felt Phineas was abusing his gift, revealing too much to the mortals, so Zeus stole him away from his

kingdom and drove him mad with starvation. Jason's men broke the curse, driving away the Harpies that stole Phineas's food, and in return Phineas gave them directions to Colchis. He also warned them of a set of clashing rocks and how to get through them.

When they finally arrived at Colchis, the Argonauts were met with some suspicion by the king, Aeëtes. His daughter Medea, who had been blessed (or cursed) with witchcraft, was suspicious of Jason at first as well. As is common in these tales, Aeëtes would only give Jason the fleece if he performed a number of tasks. He had to yoke a pair of ferocious bronze bulls, plow a field with them, and sow a set of dragon teeth in the field. These teeth grew into iron men, whom Jason had to defeat.



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The adventure of the Golden Fleece became more complex over the centuries.

## **The Capture of the Fleece**

At this point, Hera stepped in again, calling in a favor from Aphrodite, who made Medea fall in love with Jason. The night before he was to perform his tasks, Medea came to him and offered to help him. She gave him a cream to protect him from the fire breathed by the bronze bulls. She advised him to distract the iron soldiers by throwing a giant boulder into their midst, which

would cause them to attack each other. If you succeed in those tasks, she said, I will show you how to get the Golden Fleece.

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**As the tale was told throughout the centuries, almost every city in Greece claimed a hero among the Argonauts.**

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The next day, it all happened just the way Medea promised, so the king sent Jason to defeat the dragon that guarded the fleece. Once again,

Medea came to Jason the night before; this time, she gave him a potion that put the dragon to sleep and allowed him to steal the fleece. The king, furious that Jason succeeded, intends to kill Jason and the Argonauts, but Medea warns them and they escape, taking her along. Aeëtes pursues them, but Medea has brought along her youngest brother, whom she chops into pieces, hurling those pieces into the sea to slow Aeëtes as he gathers them.

The Argonauts return to Iolcos and disband. Jason goes to confront his uncle, who hesitates to give over the throne. Medea then promises to restore his youth in exchange for the throne, and Pelias agrees. After a convincing display of the process, Medea instructs Pelias's daughters to chop their father to pieces and boil him in a cauldron with some herbs—but they are the wrong herbs, and Pelias does not come back.

## **The Hero's Fall and the Kernel of Truth**

Jason is now king, but the townspeople are angered by Pelias's murder, so Jason and Medea flee to Corinth, where they marry. But Jason is soon persuaded to throw her over for the king of Corinth's daughter, which will make him heir to Corinth's throne. Jason presents it to Medea as a career opportunity, but she is enraged. The king of Corinth, fearing her anger, wants to banish her and their children, so she plays calm and compliant. But she poisons the bride's wedding dress, killing her and her father, then murders

her own children. The gods send Medea a flying chariot, and she makes her escape, leaving Jason alone in his sorrow. He returns to the *Argo*, where a piece of the ship breaks off and crushes him.

The deep moral truth of Jason's tale is the power of love for both good and ill, its power to take and destroy. From a historical point of view, archaeology in modern Georgia supports the presence of Mycenaean-age Greeks sailing throughout the Black Sea. And near the site of Colchis today, they still mine gold by using a lamb's fleece. So despite the fantastic elements, it seems Jason's story has a historical kernel. ■

### Suggested Reading

Apollonius, *Argonautica*.

Euripides, *Medea*.

Severin, *The Jason Voyage*.

Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of the claim that Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and the Corps of Discovery are the American counterparts to the Argonauts?
2. If astronauts are the modern heirs to Jason and the Argonauts, should we continue to fund a space program?

# Theseus and the Minotaur

## Lecture 7

Jason and the Argonauts belonged to the whole of the Greek world, but Theseus belongs uniquely to Athens. As the legendary first democratic ruler of Athens, he became the vehicle by which the Athenian democracy of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. expressed its highest values and aspirations.

### Who Was Theseus?

Theseus's quest began even before he was born. His father, King Aegeus of Athens, had been childless and went to the Delphic oracle for advice. Apollo gives him a typically cryptic answer: "Do not unleash the wineskin until you are home." Aegeus interprets this as an injunction against sex on his journey, but at the court of the king of Troezen, he gives in to the charms of the king's daughter and gets her with child. When the child is born, Aegeus tells the mother to put a sword and a pair of sandals under a stone but not to tell the child who his real father is.

Theseus is raised by his mother and his grandfather. When he's old enough—about 20, just like Jason—his mother sends him to the stone, saying, "If you're strong enough to pull it up, I'll tell you who your father is." Theseus lifts it easily and takes the sword and sandals, and his mother sends him to Aegeus.

### The Return Home

But like any real hero, Theseus won't take the easy route to his goal. He travels by land instead of sea and meets savage creatures like the club man, who beats people to death for no reason; the Pine Bender, who robs people, then uses pine trees like catapults to fling them to their deaths; and the Crommyonian sow, a bandit woman; the boxer man, another beats-people-to-death sort; and finally Procrustes, who measured all visitors against the length of his bed and mutilated them to fit it. We might smile a bit at these outrageous figures, but they aren't so far gone from the serial killers of today.

Theseus arrives in Athens, where Aegeus—now married to Medea—still reigns. Aegeus doesn't recognize his son, but Medea recognizes Theseus and

sees him as a threat. She whispers in Aegeus's ear that Theseus is a would-be usurper and should be poisoned. But at the feast where Medea poisons his drink, Theseus unsheathes his sword to cut some meat, and Aegeus recognizes it. Medea must flee again, and father and son are reunited.

### The Minotaur and the Labyrinth

Theseus notices that the people of Athens seem sad, and Aegeus explains that they are due to pay a tribute to King **Minos** of Crete—seven beautiful young maidens and seven young men to feed to the Minotaur who lives in the Labyrinth. The Minotaur was Minos's adopted son, the monstrous offspring of Minos's wife Pasiphae and a bull. Theseus hatches a plan: When Minos comes, he will be one of the seven boys taken, and he will kill the Minotaur.

When Theseus and the other captive Athenians were paraded into the palace of Knossos, the king's daughter, Ariadne, fell instantly in love with Theseus. As the captives were led into the Labyrinth, she slipped Theseus a sword to kill the beast and a ball of string he could use to find his way out of the maze again. Theseus destroyed the beast, and Minos was required to let the captives go.

The released Athenians sailed for Athens, Ariadne with them, but along the way Theseus abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos. This also seems a common theme in mythology: heroes who dump girlfriends who have sacrificed everything to help them. In all the excitement of his return, Theseus forgot to change the ship's sail from



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**Theseus's defeat of the Minotaur recalls Crete's ancient bull cult.**



black to white, to signal to his father that he had succeeded in his quest. Aegeus, seeing the black sails approach, threw himself into the sea that now bears his name.

As king, Theseus transformed Athens from a number of small towns into a unified power. He was not a tyrant but a democratic leader. He waged war only when necessary, and always on the side of justice, of helping the weak and oppressed. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur is central to the national identity of Athens—another major purpose of myth.

### **The Discovery of a Civilization**

Was there a Knossos? Was there a Minotaur? As with Troy, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the consensus was no. But by the time a young scholar named **Arthur Evans** was an undergraduate at Oxford, the world of classical scholarship was alive with the possibilities opened by Schliemann's discoveries. Evans, unlike Schliemann, was independently wealthy, educated, and well connected. In his early 40s, he became curator of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, still one of the most distinguished museums in the world.

When visiting Crete, Evans noticed that many local women wore talismans with unusual writing on them. The women called these milkstones and believed they gave them more milk when they nursed. Evans began collecting the stones and dreaming of an excavation at Crete. Evans got permission to excavate at Knossos in 1900 and almost immediately uncovered a palace. Evans was sure it was the palace of Minos.

Among the discoveries was a series of winding chambers that Evans was certain were the source of the Labyrinth legend. The word *labyrinthos* was not originally a Greek word; it came from Asia Minor, just as Minos's family supposedly had. Its original meaning was "double axe," and as the excavations continued, more and more double axes were recovered, along with paintings of such axes. Ornate bull heads were found as well, and sculptures that resembled bull's horns and projected from the walls. Evans believed he had discovered the first truly European civilization, preceding Mycenae by perhaps 500 years, and called it the Minoan civilization.

## The Discovery of a Language?

Evans also uncovered large numbers of baked clay tablets, some written in strange-looking scripts later called Linear A and Linear B. Evans kept these tablets to himself for a while. He became the grand authority on Minoan culture and enforced its two main tenets: one, that the Minoans were not Greek, and two, Minoan civilization had dominated the Greek world. They

were the people the Egyptians called Keftiu, “the people of the northern sea.”

No one dared to contradict Evans, no matter what they dug up at Crete, for fear of losing their positions.

**The story of Theseus and the Minotaur is central to the national identity of Athens—another major purpose of myth.**

In the early 1930s, a little boy named **Michael Ventris** came to a lecture Evans gave at the British Museum and became fascinated with the Linear

B tablets. Although he grew up to attend architecture school and serve in the Royal Air Force during World War II, like Schliemann, he eventually came back to his dream of deciphering these tablets that had confused and frustrated the greatest classical scholars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ventris succeeded because he made an assumption that the experts were wrong. They had tried every possible language except Greek, because Evans said that the Minoan culture was not Greek. By 1952, he had convinced the scholarly world that Linear B tablets were written in Greek. He found references to the great ships that would sail to Troy. He found references to the warlike character of the Mycenaens. He found reference to Zeus, Dionysus, and Hera. In other words the Greeks of the year 1250 B.C. (not 1450, as Evans insisted) wrote in Linear B.

Sir Arthur Evans was a great man who followed his dream and changed our knowledge of history forever. But he was also so eager to be right that he denied the obvious. It took another dreamer, Michael Ventris, to truly reveal the Minoan Age to us and reveal the kernel of truth within the myth of Theseus. ■

## Names to Know

**Evans, Arthur** (1851–1941): British archaeologist most notable for his discovery of the Minoan civilization. Evans was born into a family of well-educated, successful businessmen, and his father, John, was a strong supporter of his work. Educated at Oxford and Göttingen, his career was arguably more shaped by his adventurous travels, particularly in the Ottoman-occupied Balkans. He began his self-funded excavations at Knossos in 1900 and was knighted for his discoveries in 1911.

**Minos** (dates unknown): Legendary king of Crete. In mythology, he was the son of Europa and Zeus. His wife, Pasiphae, became enamored of a bull and brought forth the Minotaur, half man and half bull. To conceal his stepson, Minos built the Labyrinth. According to the historian Thucydides, Minos was ruler of a large naval empire who exacted tribute from Athens. Knossos was his capital, and thus Minos has been associated with the great palace complex discovered there by Sir Arthur Evans, who gave the name Minoan to the Bronze Age civilization of Crete.

**Ventris, Michael** (1922–1956): British architect turned cryptographer who deciphered the Linear B script of the ancient Minoans. Inspired by a lifelong love of classical civilization and a speech by Sir Arthur Evans he attended when he was only 14, he became determined to solve the great puzzle of the Minoan language. At 18, he was already publishing his theories in peer-reviewed archaeology journals, but he did not begin his work in earnest until after his service in the Royal Air Force during World War II. He and his collaborator, linguist John Chadwick, first published their brilliant work in a journal paper in 1953; their book-length treatment of the subject, *The Decipherment of Linear B*, was published a few weeks after Ventris's tragic early death in a car crash.

## Suggested Reading

Plutarch, "Theseus" in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*.

Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why do heroes dump the women who made their success possible? Does that express a higher truth—or at least a moral lesson?
2. What higher truths about their national identity might the myth of Theseus have conveyed to the Athenians?

# Myth and Athenian Drama

## Lecture 8

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**T**o the Greeks of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the Trojan War, Jason and the Argonauts, and Theseus and the Minotaur were regarded as real history. But they were also regarded as moral truths; in fact, mythology must be studied closely alongside Greek and Roman religion. Their mythology was their theology, their knowledge of the gods. Nowhere was this more true than Athens.

### **The State and the Stage**

The Athenian democracy ruled over an empire of 253 Greek cities from the Aegean Sea to the Crimea. Like Minos before them, the Athenians ruled a thalassocracy, an empire of the sea. It was a true democracy in which every citizen (that is, men over the age of 20) participated and the first government based on the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens.

The Athenians educated themselves for the awesome responsibility of self-government. Formal education was compulsory, and outside the classroom, education continued through one of the most remarkable cultural institutions in history: Athenian drama. Athens's most dramatic and creative plays are absolutely coterminous with the heyday of the Athenian democracy, from shortly after the victory over the Persians in 480 B.C. and ending in 404 B.C., when the Athenians met total defeat at the hands of the Spartans.

Attending the theater was a civic duty in Athens; you received a day's pay to enable you to attend. Women, who were not citizens, were not allowed in the audience. Greeks as a whole believed that however scandalous their gods' behavior might be, the gods demanded righteousness and justice. Wrongdoing would ultimately be punished, and the greatest of all wrongs was *hybris*. "Nothing in excess" was the fundamental message of the Athenian theater.

### **Aristotle's *Poetics***

**Aristotle**, the most profound thinker of the Greek world, watched the plays of Euripides, Aeschylus, and **Sophocles**, although they all belonged to

the century before him. He defined a tragedy as the imitation of an action, complete and noble, performed (not narrated) in noble language with riveting stage effects. Its purpose, he said, is to arouse in the audience feelings of fear and pity and thereby achieve a catharsis. The action of a play should encompass a single day, from morning to night.

All the plays that have come down to us from Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus deal with the heroic past, the age of the Trojan War or just before. Their moral issues, the Greeks felt, are eternal; each generation must deal with questions of the moral dimension of power. At the same time, they were meant to show that tragedy only happens to the truly powerful and great.

The poetry of Aeschylus or Sophocles would have resounded on your ears the way the King James Bible does today. You could grasp it, but you had to listen hard. The plays were sung; prose translations do not quite transmit the authentic experience. The accompanying music helped to arouse those feelings of fear and pity.

Why fear and pity? Because those are the two most dangerous sentiments to hold when making a decision. If the Athenian assembly is to decide a matter of war or peace, it must not act out of fear or pity but reason.

### **Sophocles and the Values of Athens**

To Aristotle, the most perfect drama was *Oedipus the King*, or *Oedipus Tyrannus*, by Sophocles, first produced in 429 B.C. when Athens was at the height of its power. Pericles, one of the greatest democratic statesmen in history, was leading an Athenian coalition in a preemptive war against Sparta. Sophocles had never trusted Pericles; he thought him an exemplar of *hybris*. Oedipus's story raises the question of fate versus free will, in parallel with political the question of the day: Did we have a choice about whether to go to war with Sparta, or was this something that fate had predetermined?

Sophocles had served his country nobly at the Battle of Salamis, had frequently served on crucial committees, and was looked on as a wise political figure. He was not sure at this point about the issue of fate versus free will. Throughout his long life, Sophocles continued to ponder this question and the meaning of Oedipus's story. By the end of his life, he saw

Athens fall, Pericles die of plague, and Athens's total defeat by Sparta. His last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, is a musing on the true values of Athens.

In this play, blind Oedipus had been wandering the world for years, a pariah wherever he went. He and his daughter Antigone come to a grove outside Athens to rest. A group of Athenians come upon them and say it is the sacred grove of Colonus, a local hero god. A sinner like Oedipus is not

welcome there. But Oedipus insists he will only leave if Athens's king, Theseus, tells him he must go.

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**To Aristotle, the most perfect drama was the *Oedipus the King*, or *Oedipus Tyrannus*, by Sophocles.**

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While waiting for Theseus's judgment, Oedipus and the Athenians discuss Oedipus's crimes and debate whether sin is truly sin if the sinner does not know he is in the

wrong. Oedipus didn't know his parents; he did not know that the king who attacked him on the road was his father, nor the widow he married his mother.

Oedipus also asks if there is any way he can cleanse himself of his sins. The Athenians send him to a spring up the road to perform a little ritual. Oedipus in his middle years had questioned every value, doubted that the gods cared about right and wrong, and scoffed at traditional religion (just as Pericles had done). Now he is wise enough not to question the gods.

Theseus arrives, tall, strong, and handsome, and invites Oedipus to his palace. Oedipus is startled by the request, but Theseus says he does not judge Oedipus; he is merely taking pity on a man who has suffered greatly and acting to end his suffering. Oedipus believes, however, that the gods want him to stay in Colonus's grove. He tells Theseus that it has been foretold that the place of his death will never be conquered. Theseus said he had not heard the prophecy and that was not why he wanted to help.

King Creon and Oedipus's sons then arrive to drag Oedipus back to Thebes so he will die there, but Theseus drives them off just to protect old Oedipus. As the day draws to a close, Theseus takes Oedipus back into the grove of Colonus. There is a clap of thunder, and Theseus returns alone. Antigone asks

what has happened to his father; Theseus says he has simply disappeared, and will be forever worshiped in that grove. He has achieved this divinity through his sins and his suffering.

### The Religious Function of Drama

Athenian theater was also a religious ceremony. Tragedies were put on in the spring, when the earth is coming alive again, in honor of Dionysus, who was not only the god of wine and theater but was also the son of a god and a human woman who suffers and dies and is brought back to life by his father. Dionysus's and Oedipus's stories seem united by a theme: Suffering must come to us all, but if we live righteously, if we learn from the examples of those who have failed, then we can be resurrected.

The catharsis offered by Oedipus's story is therefore a vicarious sacrifice. We fear that such a fate will befall us, but if we are wise enough, we realize we don't have to fail the way Oedipus did. Do not question the gods; the fear of the gods is the beginning of wisdom. ■

### Names to Know

**Aristotle** (386–322 B.C.): Greek philosopher. Although not an Athenian by birth, Aristotle spent much of his life teaching in Athens. He was the pupil of Plato and founded his own university in Athens, the Lyceum. Aristotle was perhaps the most profound mind Greece ever produced. He was the tutor of Alexander the Great and in later centuries became the most influential intellectual figure in both the European and the Islamic Middle Ages. His *Poetics* is the first book on literary criticism to come down to us from classical antiquity. It provides us with a working definition of a great book as one that has a beneficent moral impact on its audience.

**Sophocles** (496–406 B.C.): Along with Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles was one of the three most important writers of Athenian tragedy. In his plays, including *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, Sophocles probed some of the deepest questions of any era: the limits of human knowledge, free will versus fate, liberation from sin, the duties of a citizen to country and to the gods, and the relationship among liberty, religion, and morality.



## Suggested Reading

Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, p. 190–210.

Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did Athenian tragedy educate Athenians in the responsibilities of self-government?
2. In the story of *Oedipus at Colonus*, what values does Theseus represent?

# Fate and Free Will in Mythology

## Lecture 9

No civilization has surpassed the ancient Greeks in mythopoetic imagination, nor in the use of mythology to convey the most profound thoughts about human existence. No Greek city-state produced tragedies—the supreme vehicle for conveying these moral truths—except the Athenian democracy, and we are the heirs of that democracy. Our values are the values of democratic Athens.

The Athenian democracy and our own age are the two most creative periods in history. The lively intellectual life at Athens attracted scholars and thinkers from all over Greece. There grew up in Athens a whole educational system, almost a university system, in which you studied under intellectuals from all over Greece, the sophists.

### The Climate of Ideas

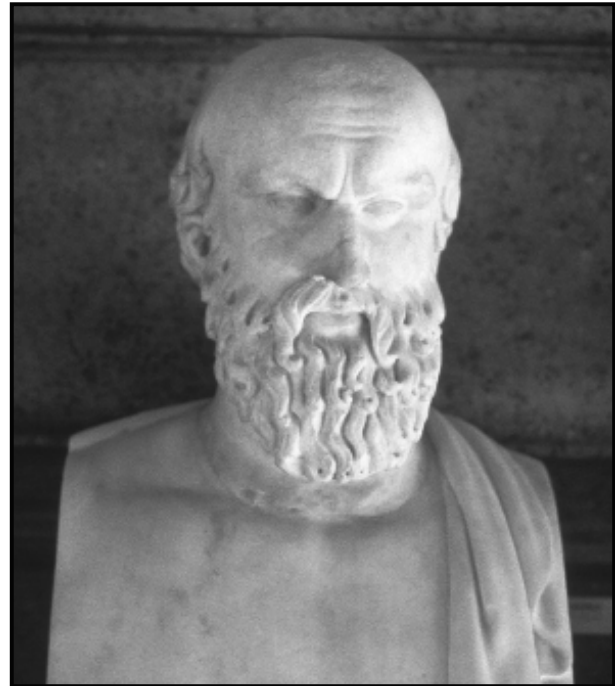
The Sophists' primary goal was to make their students successful, and in Athens, success was defined entirely by a role in politics. As Pericles said, if a man wasn't interested in politics, he had no business being in Athens. The key to success was the ability to speak well and argue convincingly. Therefore, the Sophists led their students to question every value.

In fact, Athens's people came to question whether there was such a thing as absolute right and wrong. The Sophists taught that there wasn't. In this atmosphere of questioning all traditional values and beliefs, like belief in the gods, that the Sophist Protagoras said that "man is the measure of all things." Of the gods we cannot know, nor can we know whether the gods care what humans do, or even whether they exist. Absolute right and wrong, he then argued, are simply a means by which the powerful exercise their domination over the weak. It was in the climate of these beliefs that Athenian tragedy developed in an effort to examine within the civic forum whether or not there were consequences to wrong deeds.

## Aeschylus: Politics and Theology

The first of Athens's great playwrights was **Aeschylus**. A veteran of the Battle of Marathon, his tombstone didn't say "Aeschylus, author of the *Oresteia*" but "This tomb the dust of Aeschylus doth hide, / Euphorion's son and fruitful Gela's pride. / How famed his valor Marathon may tell / long-haired Medes who knew it all too well."

Aeschylus was a profound intellect and deeply religious. His plays all deal with questions like, Who are the gods? Do they demand righteousness? Are the gods bound by fate? These questions are still with us today.



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**Aeschylus (c. 525—456 B.C.), one of the four great dramatists of ancient Athens.**

In his most profound play, the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus also asks whether there are families that are cursed, that must go through horrors generation after generation, using the House of Atreus as his example. The *Oresteia* is actually a trilogy comprising *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*, which would have been performed together. They premiered in 458 B.C.

Tragedies were meant to work on three levels: First as entertainment; second to convey a higher moral truth; and third in relationship to contemporary Athenian politics. The *Oresteia* was produced in the wake of a profound political change in Athens. Up until 461, Athens had been a balanced democracy with a supreme court, the Areopagus. In 461, Pericles came to power. A radical democrat, he encouraged the Athenians to remove their supreme court so that any law of the Athenians passed remained law. He also led the Athenians to break their old alliance with Sparta to maneuver against it, allying with Sparta's enemy Argos instead. Thus in Aeschylus's play, Agamemnon is ruler over Argos instead of Mycenae.

Aeschylus's audience would have been familiar with the legends of the House of Atreus—that is, Agamemnon's ancestors. They were arrogant men, full of *hybris*, who offended the gods through various dreadful acts—filicide, regicide, cannibalism, sabotage, adultery, and more—yet maintained a hold over the lands of Argos and Elis. Atreus, Agamemnon's father, murdered the sons of his brother Thyestes and served them to Thyestes in a stew, all because Thyestes had seduced his wife. Revenge is one thing, but Atreus murdered the innocent to punish the guilty, and the punishment was far out of proportion to the crime.

### **The *Oresteia***

Agamemnon, as we know, led the Greeks in their victory over Troy, sacrificing his daughter, Iphigenia, to ensure good winds for the fleet. As the play *Agamemnon* begins, Agamemnon arrives home from the war. He is welcomed by his wife, Clytemnestra, but it is a trap. In revenge for her murdered daughter, Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegaeus thus murder Agamemnon; drive the rightful heir, Orestes, into exile; and seize rule of Argos.

The second play, *Libation Bearers*, opens with Orestes returning to Argos to take revenge for his father's murder. When he confronts Clytemnestra, he tells her that Apollo has commanded her death; with this act of revenge, the curse on their house will be removed. He kills his mother and in turn takes control of Argos. But at the moment of his triumph, Orestes is attacked by the Furies, ancient goddesses whose task it is to avenge the murder of a mother by her son. So again, horror falls on this family.

The third play is *Eumenides*. Orestes has fled to the shrine of Apollo, hoping the god will take pity upon him. The Apollo argues with the Furies, but they will not yield, so Orestes, Apollo, and the Furies go to Athens—with its tradition of helping the weak, pitiful, and cursed—to present their case to Athena, goddess of wisdom.

The Furies say Orestes is clearly guilty; he undoubtedly murdered his mother. Apollo presents an argument quite typical of the Sophists: A mother really isn't a parent; she's just a field where a man's seed grows. The father is all that matters. Athena agrees because Athena had no mother; she sprang

from the forehead of Zeus. Orestes is acquitted. Apollo, to appease the Furies, renames them the Eumenides, “the blessed ones,” and says they will be honored in Athens forever.

The higher truth within this dark, dark tale is that the gods care very deeply about right and wrong. The Greeks understood that certain families do seem cursed, generation after generation. The *Oresteia* argues that what really matters is not your fate but how you respond to it. ■

### Name to Know

**Aeschylus** (525–456 B.C.): Along with Euripides and Sophocles, Aeschylus was one of the three great Athenian tragedians. As a youth, he fought at the Battle of Marathon. His play *The Persians* was produced in 472 B.C. and is probably our earliest extant Greek drama. It is also the only extant drama to be set in the poet’s own day rather than in the mythological past. His *Oresteia*, dealing with the murder of Agamemnon and its consequences, is our only extant trilogy from Athenian drama. The tragedies of Aeschylus reflected his deep concern with liberty, law, and justice.

### Suggested Reading

Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*.

Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, p. 144–177.

### Questions to Consider

1. Do you think that science has gotten us closer in the past century to resolving the apparent tension between fate and free will? Why or why not?
2. Why is it important that the Furies are denied their right to hound Orestes?

# Atlantis—Fact or Fiction?

## Lecture 10

**F**rom the evidence thus far, you might be inclined to think that all Greek myths have a kernel of historical truth. But this is not the case. Creation myths in particular do not have a historical kernel. No one can attest—no human, at least—to what happened when the world was created. But a myth does not need a historical kernel to convey higher truth.

No one understood that better than **Plato**, the greatest philosopher in history. It has been rightly said that all of philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. What he wrote and the questions he dealt with have set the agenda for philosophy ever since. He was a true product of the brilliant intellectual age of Athenian democracy, although he never forgave Athens for the execution of his mentor, **Socrates**. He believed deeply that the Athenian democracy was the worst, most degenerate form of government.

In 367 B.C., Plato began work on *The Republic*, which would ultimately describe his ideal state—which was as different from the Athenian democracy as possible. *The Republic* is a model of a great book. It has a great theme—the purpose of government. It is written in noble language. It reaches across the ages, still shaping our ideas about government. Plato argued that the only purpose of government is justice—doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Thus a government should be constructed to support this purpose.

### The Noble Lie

Plato believed, quite reasonably, that every government reflects the soul of its citizens. He divided souls into three types: those who want to be left alone to make money (the producers), those who want to fight (the warriors), and those best endowed to lead (the guardians). Each of us has a little bit of each type, but more of one than the others.

In Plato's ideal republic, the guardians would use a noble lie to get the warriors and producers to do what they should, such as the myth of Er, which concludes *The Republic*. Er (a name that means “nobody”) is killed in battle

and laid out for burial. His soul goes to the underworld and sees how the gods reward those who do good and punish those who do evil on Earth. Then he returns to his body and tells all the citizens of the republic what he has seen. This noble lie will be taught by the guardians to ensure good behavior in the other citizens—a myth that serves a higher purpose.

### **The Myth of Atlantis**

This brings us to the myth that so many people want to find a historical kernel in: Atlantis. The myth of Atlantis appears in two of Plato's dialogues—*The Timaeus* and *The Critias*—which follow immediately on *The Republic* and are meant to continue its argument.

*The Timaeus* is concerned with the creation of the world. The dialogue begins with Timaeus and Critias telling Socrates, “We found our discussion last night of the republic so fascinating that we talked all night. We wondered if such a just society ever existed.” Critias then repeated what he told Timaeus the night before, a story his grandfather had learned from **Solon**, who had written Athens's constitution. Solon, in turn, had heard it from an Egyptian priest.

Some 9,000 years before Socrates's day, the story said, an enormous continent called Atlantis, as large as Africa and Asia together, lay in the Atlantic Ocean. It had fabulous wealth, fertile lands, and enormous cities. But eventually, power corrupted Atlantis's kings, and they decided to conquer the world. Only Athens stood against them.

That Athens was the ideal society. It had brave warriors, hard-working producers, and nothing in excess. It was ruled by philosophers—men and women who had been trained to protect the state. They were wise enough to see the danger of conquest by Atlantis. So their forces drove the Atlantians out of the Mediterranean, back into the Atlantic Ocean. Then a huge earthquake and vast tidal wave struck Atlantis, and it sank beneath the ocean.

The next day, Critias offers a more detailed description of Atlantis—geography, technology, and so on. Then suddenly, the dialogue stops, almost in mid-sentence; either Critias (or Plato) ran out of steam, or part of the manuscript is lost. Aristotle, Plato's most famous pupil, when asked about Atlantis said it never existed; it was fabricated by Plato to

demonstrate an ideal society—meaning Athens 9,000 years ago, not Atlantis. In antiquity, most people who read the dialogues understood the Atlantis story as a noble lie.

### **The Lie Becomes History**

Towards the end of antiquity, in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., there was a renewed interest in Plato. The Neoplatonists read all sorts of allegorical meanings into Plato's dialogues. Some believed that Atlantis was a real historical entity. In Europe's Middle Ages, knowledge of Plato declined, to be revived by the Renaissance humanists. Thomas Moore took some

inspiration from Atlantis for his *Utopia*, but he did not believe in a real Atlantis.

**Power corrupted Atlantis's kings, and they decided to conquer the world. Only Athens stood against them.**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the story of Atlantis began to grab the human imagination. The American politician Ignatius Donnelly wrote *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*.

Published in 1882, it became an immediate bestseller, despite being a disorganized, rambling work. Its premise is that Plato would never tell a lie; thus Atlantis was real. From that premise, he deduced a whole antediluvian world, more technologically advanced and racially "pure" than our own. Donnelly went on to write *Ragnarok*, in which the world was destroyed by fire and comets. He came to the conclusion that the world had been destroyed many times over by floods, fire, and comets.

Donnelly's *Atlantis* went through many editions and had an impact far beyond the world of popular science. It was read and much admired by Helena Blavatsky, mystic and founder of the Theosophical Society, who spread the story of Atlantis to her followers and even "discovered" societies whose existence predated Atlantis.

No 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholar took the Atlantis myth seriously. Those who studied Plato understood it as a noble lie. But some less reputable souls, getting wind of the money made from the discoveries of Troy, Mycenae, and the palaces of Knossos, realized there was profit in the search for Atlantis, too. Some



postulated that Santorini, called Thera in the ancient world, was Atlantis; this Minoan colony was in fact devastated by a huge seismic event. Others nominated Crete, wiped out by the events on Thera. Neither theory fits the radiocarbon evidence. Still others have pointed to the Bahamas, Cuba, and a point somewhere off the coast of Spain.

You cannot discover what never existed. No site in the ancient world has been more carefully excavated than Athens. There is nothing there anywhere near 9,000 years old. Plato told a noble lie. Greed and cupidity tried to turn it into some salable commodity. ■

### Names to Know

**Plato** (c. 428–348 B.C.): Athenian philosopher regarded as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, philosophers of antiquity. Born of a noble Athenian family, he became the disciple of Socrates. His early and middle dialogues provide a wealth of information on the intellectual life of Athens in the later 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as well as Socrates's career. After Socrates was executed in 399 B.C., Plato traveled though Greece, Egypt, and Magna Graecia (the southern Italian Greek colonies). He founded the Academy at Athens, which counted Aristotle among its students.

**Socrates** (469–399 B.C.): Athenian philosopher and mentor to Plato who developed the *elenchus*, a rigorous method of dissecting the arguments of others. He had served in the Athenian army as a hoplite and was a member of the Council of Five Hundred, which prepared the agenda for Athens's democratic Assembly. He was tried and executed on charges of impiety and corrupting Athenian youth, as described by Plato and Xenophon. His calm acceptance of death, as described by Plato in the *Phaedo*, served as an inspiration throughout antiquity.

**Solon** (c. 630–c. 560 B.C.): Athenian statesman and author of the Athenian democracy. Originally a successful merchant, Solon was elected governor, or archon, of Athens in 594 B.C. in the wake of an economic crisis. He refused to become a dictator, however, declaring that he would solve the current problems and then step down. He created a written constitution for Athens, establishing a balanced democracy in which all adult male citizens were

granted the right to vote, to serve on juries, and to bring legal actions against others. The right to hold office was reserved for the wealthiest Athenians. Solon also established a supreme court that had the power to declare laws unconstitutional. Solon then declared that the laws should not be changed for 10 years and, true to his word, retired from office and left Athens.

### Suggested Reading

Fears, “Atlantis and the Minoan Thalassocracy.”

———, “Atlantology and the Classical Tradition.”

Plato, *Timaeus*, *Critias*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What moral lessons did Plato convey to the Athenians by his story of Atlantis? What moral lessons does the story of Atlantis convey to you?
2. Some professional archeological societies believe that “fictional archaeology” such as Atlantology is dangerous and needs to be discouraged. Do you agree?

# ***The Epic of Gilgamesh***

## **Lecture 11**

**T**he Greeks were rich in their poetic imagination, but so too were the peoples of the Middle East. The trade routes of the Mediterranean led to a lot of cultural exchange—ideas, architecture, and mythology—among the Greek, Egyptian, Hittite, and Babylonian civilizations. Thus the Middle East is the next natural step in our exploration of the historical elements of mythology.

### **The Origins of the Gilgamesh Epic**

The supreme example of mythology in the early Middle East is the story of Gilgamesh. Dating to about 2700 B.C., it tells the story of a historical king who ruled the Mesopotamian city of Uruk. Among his other achievements, he built the city's walls. The story was originally told in Sumerian, then translated into a Semitic language by the Akkadians, who conquered Sumer. They passed it to the Babylonians and Assyrians.

Around 1100 B.C., a poet named **Sîn-lēqi-unninni** wrote down this magnificent story just as Homer composed the *Iliad*, taking a number of different legends and giving it an enduring literary form. It was copied over and over again on clay tablets; it was even used as a textbook for scribes learning to write.

The Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser so loved the story that he put a copy in his library sometime in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. There it lay hidden when the Assyrian civilization fell, disappearing from our cultural lexicon, until the tablets were rediscovered by British archaeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was only when British Museum scholars translated the tablets that they realized what a remarkable treasure they had found—an ancient Sumerian parallel to the story of the flood from Genesis.

### **When Gilgamesh Met Enkidu**

The fragments we have of the Gilgamesh epic tell a remarkable tale of the concerns of the earliest inhabitants of the Middle East, which parallel our concerns today. Gilgamesh, the half-human, half-divine king of Uruk, is

endowed with enormous strength and great beauty. He's also a bully. The people of Uruk appeal to the gods: "Get rid of Gilgamesh! Bring in another strong ruler, but somebody who is just." Unlike the Greeks, they don't consider the idea of ruling themselves.

One theme of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the conflict between civilized, urban life and the wandering life of the nomad, as introduced by the character

**Humankind had become so evil that the gods decided to destroy everyone with a huge flood and start over. But Utnapishtim was a righteous man, and the gods told him that he and his wife would be saved.**

Enkidu. He is a Tarzan-like wild man, living among animals and untouched by civilization. The elders of Uruk command a prostitute, Shamhat, to civilize him. After seven days and nights together, Enkidu tried to return to the animals, but the gazelles ran away from him, the lions snarled at him. He had lost his innocence. So he goes to Uruk, where he meets Gilgamesh and challenges him to a fight.

Gilgamesh eagerly takes on this new opponent. After a real knock-down, drag-out brawl, the two men suddenly stop and embrace each other. Gilgamesh told Enkidu, "You're the friend I've been dreaming about.

We will be together till the ends of your lives." Now a reformed man, Gilgamesh stops tormenting the people of Uruk and, with Enkidu, embarks on a quest.

Together they battle the fire-breathing monster Humbaba and harvest his cedar forests to build temples to their gods. This feat makes Gilgamesh so famous and admired that Ishtar, the goddess of love, falls for him. But Gilgamesh rejects her. He knows how badly she treats her lovers. Furious, Ishtar demands that Anu, king of the gods, send the bull of heaven to kill Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

The bull of heaven burns up all the land until the two friends can beat and kill it. Even more enraged, Ishtar curses Enkidu, and despite Gilgamesh's prayers, he sickens and dies. He holds a six-day vigil by the corpse's

side, unable to accept his dear friend's death. Gradually, an idea dawns on Gilgamesh: to find the secret of eternal life.

### **The Quest for Immortality**

In Gilgamesh's world, only two mortals have achieved immortality: Utnapishtim and his wife, survivors of a worldwide flood. They live across the Waters of Death. Gilgamesh must cross the land of the scorpion men and pass through a great tunnel there; if he does not traverse the tunnel between one sunrise and the next, he will burn to death. Even if he survives the crossing and reaches the Waters of Death, no one can cross the waters alive.

Gilgamesh prays for his mother's blessing and sets out. He enters the tunnel, which is as black as death itself, and at its end he reaches a sort of tavern, run by a beautiful barmaid, Siduri. He tells her his name, but she doubts his identity. He exits the tunnel to scope out the Waters of Death. There he meets some stone men, whom he fights and kills. When he returns to Siduri's tavern, she tells him he's really lost now; the waters of death are like acid, and the stone men were the only ones who could touch the water and survive.

Nonetheless, Siduri sends him to meet Urshanabi, Utnapishtim's ferryman, who instructs Gilgamesh to cut 300 huge cedars to make new ferry poles, but he makes no guarantees that the poles will get them across the way the stone men's arms could. Sure enough, each of the poles dissolves. Finally, Gilgamesh makes a sail of his shirt, and the ferry is blown to where Utnapishtim lives.

### **The Great Flood**

Utnapishtim explains to Gilgamesh that he and his wife are the only mortals who can live for eternity. He explains by telling the story of the great flood, a story that is familiar to those who



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**Gilgamesh was a real king whose remarkable works are overshadowed by his legendary adventures.**

have read the Bible: Humankind had become so evil that the gods decided to destroy everyone with a huge flood and start over. But Utnapishtim was a righteous man, and the gods told him that he and his wife would be saved. They were to build a boat and take onboard all manner of animals and plants with which to rebuild the Earth.

Utnapishtim's rains lasted for seven days and nights, not 40, but like Noah he landed on a mountaintop and sent out a dove, a sparrow, and a raven to search for dry land. The gods gave Utnapishtim immortality for his service, but they did not make him a god; he could not pass on his gift to Gilgamesh. But he tells Gilgamesh that if he can stay awake for seven days and nights, he will ask the gods to make Gilgamesh immortal. Yet Gilgamesh fell asleep immediately, although he tries to lie about it.

Still, Utnapishtim takes pity on Gilgamesh and instructs him to dive in a spot near the shore of the Waters of Death to obtain a plant that will give him immortality. Gilgamesh does as he was instructed, but before he eats it, he wants to bathe and purify himself. While he is bathing, a snake comes along and eats the flower, and Gilgamesh knows he has failed in his quest.

In the end, Gilgamesh learns the same lesson as Achilles: What matters is what we achieve in this life, not how long we live. Gilgamesh was an outstanding hero; his name, if not his body, would achieve immortality. ■

### Name to Know

**Sîn-lēqi-unninni** (fl. 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.): Babylonian poet and author of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Little is known of this poet who wrote the most enduring version of the life of the great god-king of Uruk, known as the 12 Tablet Poem. The most notable feature of Sîn-lēqi-unninni's account of Gilgamesh is that it emphasizes his humanity over his divinity, his suffering and struggles over his great works. As such, it was arguably a model for all subsequent heroic literature.

## Suggested Reading

Dundes, *The Flood Myth*.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Do you think the monsters and other marvelous happenings in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* add to or detract from the higher truth it conveys?
2. One of the central themes of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the contrast between civilized life and the free life of the hunter. Is this a contrast that endures to our day? If so, how?

# Gilgamesh and History

## Lecture 12

**G***ilgamesh* is a great book; it has a great theme, noble language, longevity, and personal resonance. It is on par with the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the magnificent epics of Indian poetry. It also has a historical kernel.

Gilgamesh was a real king of Uruk. We have inscriptions documenting his building of temples and the walls of Uruk dated to around 2700 B.C. The story also shows how history gets transformed into myth: Gilgamesh was such an overwhelming figure to the imagination that he accumulated adventures as his story was retold.

The more significant historical kernel of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the beginning of civilization. Sometime around 8000 B.C., humans began to settle down, build small villages, cultivate crops, and domesticate animals. Archaeologists are making new discoveries about these civilizations all the time, but questions remain: When did agriculture begin, where did it begin, and why?

### **The Birth of the City-State**

Around 3000 B.C., another revolution occurred—the beginning of civilized, or urban, life. It occurred first, without doubt, in Mesopotamia and Egypt well before it occurred in other classical civilizations such as China and India. Between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—what we would call Iraq today—writing was invented and monumental architecture began, the latter made possible by the invention of bronze tools. Complex government structures arose as well.

In Egypt, the birth of civilization was marked by the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. The specific figure who achieved it was Narmer, who left behind the earliest historical document in existence, detailing his conquest of Egypt. Narmer ruled from his capital at Memphis as a pharaoh—a god on earth, son of the great god Amun-Ra.



In Mesopotamia, civilization arose first among the Sumerians. They called themselves the black-haired people. According to their tradition, they came to the Tigris and Euphrates valley from India by sea. Their political system had a king, but not a god-king. He might be semidivine like Gilgamesh, but he was appointed by the god to rule over the city. Although there were many different gods, each city tended to have a special patron divinity.

### **How Floods Changed the World**

Why was there a sudden burst of civilization in these two areas? It may well have resulted from climate change. A great dry period struck both Egypt and Mesopotamia, followed by incessant flooding of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile. The floods could only be tamed by complex hydraulic engineering—canals and irrigation systems—which expanded the amount of land that could be cultivated. Suddenly, a regular crop could be relied on. There was enough food to create a market, which allowed some people to specialize in crafts, tool making, and building rather than farming. All this required a strong centralized government that could mobilize the manpower to create those canals and irrigation systems.

### **The World's First Kings**

The peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia chose strong, authoritarian, centralized rule. Both the first pharaohs of Egypt and kings like Gilgamesh were, in modern terms, Progressive; they believed that government should do for the individual what the individual cannot do for himself. In exchange for this organization, the people paid taxes.

Writing was most likely invented soon after the rise of these strong rulers; the rulers needed a way to keep tax records and be certain there was enough money for their building projects—with enough left over for these rulers to live well. As soon as the temples rose in Mesopotamia and Egypt, conspicuous consumption among the king and his closest advisors and priests began.

The conspicuous consumption—these rulers would be the first to tell you—was not for their own benefit but an entitlement to the people. Agriculture could not be carried out during the entire year. Great enterprises like the pyramids, temples, and walls were undertaken to give people jobs. Thus the

Great Pyramids, dating to around 2500 B.C., may be the most magnificent and enduring example of a public works project in history.

For all their advancement, however, the cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia had not discovered the idea of freedom; that would be left to the Greeks.

**The ancient Middle East provides us with an eternal lesson that is as valid today as it was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.: Freedom is not a universal value.**

Their people had liberties—permission to behave in certain ways from the king—but were granted by the king and could be revoked by him just as easily. No one was free but the king.

The beginning of civilization also marked the first attempt to build empires. Egypt came into being as an empire covering the whole Nile.

From the earliest days of the cities in Sumer, there were constant attempts to expand. By roughly 2200 B.C., the first true superpower had been created: Akkad, under the rule of **Sargon**, spread from north of Sumer and may have reached what we call Turkey and Iran today. Sargon was the first ruler over a multiethnic empire; he allowed his subjects to preserve their customs, but he still demanded their absolute loyalty.

### **What Is Freedom?**

The ancient Middle East provides us with an eternal lesson that is as valid today as it was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.: Freedom is not a universal value. The concept of freedom in the modern West consists of three separate components: national freedom, political freedom, and individual freedom. National freedom is freedom from foreign domination. Political freedom is your right to vote, hold office, and serve on juries. Individual freedom is the freedom to live as you choose as long as you harm no one else. National freedom is as old as these ancient strong rulers; throughout history, political freedom has been much rarer, and individual freedom the rarest of all.

You can have political freedom and individual freedom without national freedom. Japan and Germany never really had political or individual freedom until they lost their national freedom in World War II. In ancient Sparta, the

people had national and political freedom, but not individual freedom; the Spartan way of life was strict and compulsory.

Earlier in this course, the Middle East was called the crucible of conflict and the graveyard of empires. Where is the empire of Sargon? Of Cyrus? Alexander? Constantine? The Crusaders? The Ottomans? Napoleon, who came to Egypt at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century bearing the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, failed to conquer Egypt and instill those values. The British came next and tried and failed for 50 years to bring democracy to the Middle East. The French returned after World War I; this time, they wrote constitutions and had the backing of the League of Nations. All the parliamentary governments they established failed. After World War II, the United States helped establish the nation of Israel. While it is a working democracy, it was built on the values of Europe, by Jews who came from Europe and America, not on the values of the people of the Middle East.

Democracy, like the Christianity of the medieval Crusaders, is the modern West's religion. Nowhere in the world are you more free than in the United States—free to live as you choose, even if that means taking your freedoms, like voting, for granted. From this Western perspective, perhaps we cannot accept that the Middle East prefers a strong man, a Gilgamesh, to democracy. Perhaps one of those myths with no historical kernel is that freedom is a universal value. ■

### Name to Know

**Sargon** (fl. 23<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.): Ancient Mesopotamian ruler who consolidated the first empire in the Fertile Crescent. No documents survive from his lifetime, and his capital city, known as Agade, was destroyed and never rediscovered. According to myth, his life story is much like Moses's—a foundling discovered floating in a basket on a river, but this time raised by a gardener, not a princess. He somehow became the cupbearer to the local king, then advisor and military leader, then king by strength of arms. He was wise enough, however, to stabilize his realm with wealth, establishing and encouraging a trade network that may have stretched from Greece to India. Sumerian myths go on to attribute the collapse of his 56-year rule (as they attribute the collapse of every king's rule) to acts of sacrilege.

## Suggested Reading

Dundes, *The Flood Myth*.

Hallo and Simpson, *The Ancient Near East*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Is the flood story an example of transmission of themes from one culture to another? Does it demonstrate a mythopoetic device that arose independently in many civilizations, or does the story preserve a universal kernel of truth?
2. The birth of civilization in the Middle East led not to democratic forms of government but rather to absolute despotism. Why?

# The Book of Genesis

## Lecture 13

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**T**oday, almost no one worships the gods of ancient Greece—or even takes them seriously. We may accept the historical reality of Gilgamesh the man, but we don't regard him as semidivine. Yet there is another book, committed to writing in the same era as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, that addresses the nature of divinity and shapes the lives of millions, even billions, of people today: the Bible.

The Bible is the primary source for two great world religions—Judaism and Christianity—and exercised a significant influence on the development of a third—Islam. Whether one believes that every word of it is literal truth or disputes every line, what cannot be denied is that the values it conveys have shaped people's lives for centuries.

### **Begin at the Beginning**

The word “genesis” is Greek, reminding us that one of the most widely used early versions of the Bible was not the Hebrew text but a Greek translation made for the Jewish congregation in Egypt. The Hebrew name for the first book of the Bible is simply its opening phrase: “In the Beginning.”

The book of Genesis can be divided into two primary parts. The first 11 chapters deal with how the world came into being. The remainder deals with the relationship of the creator, God, with his chosen people, the people of Israel.

Almost every civilization on earth has a creation myth. The Greeks' is found in **Hesiod**, a contemporary of Homer who composed around 730 B.C. Out of chaos came the mother Earth goddess who first brought forth the Heaven; then she and the Heavens brought forth the Titans. The Babylonians had a creation myth that shares certain elements with the Genesis creation story but also included monsters and gods fighting among themselves.

Compared with these stories, the creation myth as told in Genesis is simple, beautiful, and moving. God, singular, creates the world out of love, and the

apex of his creation is humankind. He places Adam and Eve in a walled garden, a paradise—Eden, also a widespread feature of creation myths. In Eden, Adam and Eve have everything they want, but of course the Bible is savvy about human nature: We want to destroy what is perfect. When the serpent offers them temptation, they seize it, and God—an anthropomorphic figure who strolls in the garden in the cool of the evening—confronts his creations, uncovers their sin, and banishes them and their descendents to a life of pain, toil, and sorrow.

### **“You Shall Be as Gods”**

Perhaps in these past two generations we have become like gods in our technological skill, but our progress has brought us much information and little wisdom. From nuclear fission to human cloning, we will be faced with many difficult moral questions as the result of our new powers.

In Genesis, it is the fruit of the tree of knowledge that destroys human innocence and makes humankind its own worst enemy. Paradise was lost forever. Adam and Eve’s sons then experience the same conflict we saw in *Gilgamesh*, enmity between Cain, a tiller of the fields (that is, a city dweller) and Abel, a hunter (that is, a man of the wilds). The God of Genesis clearly prefers the offering of the hunter, and so brother slays brother, human slays human. But God reminds Cain that he is “his brother’s keeper.” Each human being is the guardian of all others.

### **The Righteous Man**

No wonder God began to doubt the wisdom of this creation of humans and considered eliminating them all. Our very existence was saved by the presence of one righteous man on earth: Noah. The idea that one righteous individual can save the rest of humankind is a prevalent theme in Judaism and, more obviously, in Christianity.

No doubt Noah’s neighbors thought Noah had lost his mind when he built his ark, claiming it was God’s command. Here is another theme and profound truth of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: You must put your faith absolutely and totally in God. You do not question God. In fact, that is what the word “Islam” means—absolute submission.

The story of the flood found in the Bible is quite similar to that from *Gilgamesh*, with Utnapishtim in the Noah role. This time, however, God's covenant is not just with his righteous servant but with his descendents: "Never again will I destroy the human race." Still, Noah's descendents once again became full of *hybris*, raising the Tower of Babel in an attempt to reach God himself. True to his word, God did not destroy the human race,

but he did destroy their tower and punished them with the divergence of the single human language into many.

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**Scholars of linguistics have many different theories about how the various language families came into being. ... Some scholars believe they all derived from one prototype.**

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No matter how skeptical you are, you can find a kernel of truth in the Tower of Babel story. The great cities of Mesopotamia built high-rise temples—ziggurats. Scholars of linguistics have many different

theories about how the various language families came into being—Semitic languages like Hebrew and Arabic, Indo-European languages like Persian, German, Russian, Greek, and Latin, and Ural-Altaic languages like Finnish and Mongolian. Some scholars believe they all derived from one prototype.

### **The Chosen People**

In chapter 12 of Genesis, we begin to learn the story of the Hebrew patriarchs. This is the point when the universal God becomes the special patron of Israel. He makes a covenant with Abraham that Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, will become a mighty nation as numerous as the stars in the sky and the pebbles on the beach. They will be a ruling nation as long as they keep faith with God. As the sign of this special covenant, they circumcise their male youth.

But God tests Abraham's faith further. Like Agamemnon, he is asked to sacrifice a child; unlike Agamemnon, Abraham has only one child, a son, Isaac. Still, Abraham is willing to obey God's command, despite the pain of the loss. But unlike Agamemnon, Abraham's god spares the child, giving Abraham a ram to sacrifice instead.

## The Hebrews Come to Egypt

Abraham, Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob were all wandering herdsmen. Egyptian records from the 16<sup>th</sup> century B.C. refer to a people called the Hiabiru, who may have been the people of Abraham's tribe. The Hiabiru and other nomads sometimes came into Egypt willingly to find food and work; other times, they were not so willing. According to Genesis, Jacob's youngest son, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt by his own jealous brothers. (This was, in the story, a kinder alternative to killing him.) Trade caravans such as the one Joseph's brothers sold him to did exist; in fact, this was the only way foreigners could safely bring trade goods to Egypt.

Joseph became a slave of an important Egyptian official called Potiphar, and we do know that Semitic slaves were common in wealthy Egyptian households. Through the machinations of Potiphar's wife, Joseph goes from bad to worse and ends up in jail. He wonders if God has abandoned him. But in fact, God has already given him a way out: Through his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph comes to the attention of the pharaoh. He is able to warn the pharaoh of a coming famine, and the pharaoh is thus able to store enough food to see his people through the worst.

Joseph becomes the pharaoh's grand vizier and introduces one of the first recorded instances of excessive taxation. For a time, the Egyptians and Hebrews coexist peacefully in Egypt, but this situation will not last, and God will have to lead his people in an exodus. ■

### Name to Know

**Hesiod** (fl. c. 700 B.C.): Greek poet, contemporary of Homer, who is primarily known for two works: the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. The *Theogony* is a sort of biography of the Greek gods, which he undertook, according to the poem, at the behest of the Muses. It also contains an account of the creation of the world. *Works and Days* is an elegy to a lost golden age of mankind and a testimony to the ultimate triumph of justice. Although somewhat gloomier in outlook than Homer and less commonly read today, he was renowned in his own time and was a remarkable talent.



## Suggested Reading

The book of Genesis.

Browning, "Genesis," *Oxford Dictionary of the Bible*.

Dundes, *The Flood Myth*.

Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Compare the flood stories in Genesis and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. What do you make of the similarities and differences?
2. Compare the stories of Jacob and Esau with that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. What is the message about civilized man versus wild man in each?

# Exodus—The Foundation of the Jewish People

## Lecture 14

**G**enerations pass between the end of the book of Genesis and the start of the book of Exodus. The Hebrews are no longer favored by the pharaoh. They were enslaved. They were starved. And yet their numbers were so great that the pharaoh had an entire generation of children put to death. One child survived—Moses—to be raised as an Egyptian in the pharaoh's court, unaware of his heritage.

### The Call to Duty

The name “Moses” is not Hebraic but standard Egyptian, often found attached to the names of gods and rulers (i.e., Thutmosis and Amenmoses). As Moses grew up, he watched the escalating oppression of the Hebrews. Eventually, he is forced to flee into the desert after killing a man who was beating a Hebrew slave. Like the ancient Hebrews, he became a wandering herdsman.

One day, in search of some missing sheep, he comes upon a marvel: A bush that burns but is not consumed. A voice speaks to him from the burning bush. When Moses asks who is speaking, the voice tells him, “I am who I am,” a dramatic declaration of monotheism and mystery. We don't need to know any more about God than that he *is*.

God commands Moses to free the enslaved Hebrews. He demurs, noting that he does not speak well. God insists, sending Moses's brother Aaron along to speak for Moses. To every objection, God replies, “I am who am and I will make this possible.”

### Negotiations with the Pharaoh

The pharaoh, predictably, finds Moses's command to release the Hebrews ridiculous. He believes his court magicians can overcome anything Moses can bring forth. He doesn't deny that the Hebrew god has sent Moses, but he does believe his gods are stronger, but in trial after trial, Moses outstrips the magicians' magic.

Finally, Moses warns Pharaoh, “Unless you let the Hebrew people go, plagues will be sent upon you.” And so they are. First, the Nile’s waters turn red as blood, a plague of frogs descends on the land, and a plague of gnats follows—all explicable natural phenomena, and the pharaoh is unmoved. Flies, cattle disease, human disease, locusts, hail—each time, the pharaoh would seem to waver, then he would refuse to release the Hebrews after the plague passed.

Finally, a darkness filled the whole of the land of Egypt, and Moses warned the pharaoh, “Unless you let the Hebrews go, God will kill the first-born son of every Egyptian.” And God keeps his word. Scholars may say the plague of the first born is just a story, but it has resonated through the ages. For the descendents of those Hebrews, it is the founding event of their nation.

The pharaoh releases the Hebrews at last, then changes his mind. He and his army, riding in chariots, chased the Hebrews to the shores of the Red Sea. Many pseudoscientific explanations for what happened next have been proposed; the Hebrews simply called it a miracle as God opened the Red Sea for them to walk across and let the waters rush back in on the pharaoh and his soldiers. Interestingly, what scholars believe is the oldest single line in the Old Testament is found in the song celebrating this victory: “I will sing praise unto the Lord. The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. I will sing praise to the Lord. He is the Lord mighty in battle. He is our God.”

### **The Ten Commandments**

The ancient Hebrews were no different from any of us; a long and arduous journey caused them to doubt their leader and their God. Some suggested they return to Egypt—at least there was something to eat. They came to a mountain in the Sinai Desert, and Moses climbed the mountain alone. There he received the Ten Commandments from God.

Whether or not one accepts the historical truth of this event, one should note that the Hebrews weren’t the only people in ancient Mesopotamia who believed that a god gave the law directly to their leader. Copies of the Code of Hammurabi were preceded with an image of the god Shamash giving this law to Hammurabi.

The first commandment, “You will have no other god before me,” is the dictate of an absolute monarch to this people. Recall that “liberty,” in Mesopotamia, was a gift from an all-powerful king to his people, a gift that could be taken back. Thus this commandment echoes the facts of law and leadership within ancient Mesopotamia.

As for the rest of the commandments, on an average day one easily notes how many of them we in Western society flout, despite how fundamental they were to the development of our civilization. Christians, for example, have made graven (and painted) images of God from Christianity’s earliest days and still do so. We casually swear and blaspheme. We work on our Sabbath day—whichever day of the week our particular tradition may hold holy. Even in secular terms, that’s a real loss—we don’t set aside a single day to focus on what is most important, be it God, family, community, or solitude.

The first four commandments deal with your relationship to God, the rest with your relationship to the community. There is no society in history where the parents are not honored—or not supposed to be honored—by their children. We still prohibit the taking of life, although we argue about to what and whom this rule applies. We frown on adultery, although each society might define the term differently; the ancient Hebrews themselves practiced polygamy and concubinage. Theft, lying under oath, covetousness—another word for jealousy—are still seen as evils and, except for the last of those, are forbidden by law. The commandments have had a profound impact on how the Western world defines good and evil.



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**The Ten Commandments can be divided into those concerning a relationship with God and those dealing with the community.**

## **The Commandments' Legacy**

For every society on earth, belief in a god has been intertwined with morality, and morality is tied up with freedom. Every society honors its elders; they all prohibit the random taking of life and breaking promises. A group of Christians, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and perhaps even atheists could agree that the Ten Commandments contain some values they all could endorse. From being just an event in the history of an obscure people in the ancient Middle East, the Ten Commandments went on to transform societies and individuals into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Even while Moses was receiving the commandments, the Hebrew people were falling away from the God who had brought them out of slavery. He descended Sinai to find them worshiping a golden calf—perhaps an icon of the Egyptian cow goddess, Hathor. This was the start of a cycle—time and time again, they would fall away from the commandments of God. Every time they would suffer, and every time God would give them one more chance.

They continued their march. Moses would die before entering the holy land of Canaan, but the Hebrew people, led by their fierce warlord, Joshua, swept in and reclaimed the land where Abraham had once dwelled. Archaeological evidence shows there was a prolonged period of warfare in Canaan around 1100 B.C., around the time traditionally attributed to the Exodus.

These events still resonate in the region today, in the ongoing struggle among the peoples living in the Middle East. What is most important to us, however, is the values the story of the Exodus convey. All through history, the Hebrews have believed they were chosen by God. That status was not always an easy one to maintain, and the descendants of the Hebrews have suffered greatly. Yet their language and the scriptures written in it have survived. ■

### **Suggested Reading**

The book of Exodus.

Browning, “Exodus,” *Oxford Dictionary of the Bible*.

Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Do you think that the plagues of Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea can be explained rationally or scientifically?
2. Do you think the Ten Commandments should be displayed in U.S. courtrooms?

# The Historical Power of Biblical Stories

## Lecture 15

Genesis and Exodus, like the *Iliad*, embody the values and aspirations of a very great people, the Hebrews who built the first Kingdom of Israel, and a strong kernel of historical truth. They are also indisputably great books. Their great themes are the creation of the world and the Hebrews' place as God's chosen people. They are written in magisterial poetry and prose—the King James translation conveys that same majesty into English. And of course, the Bible has spoken through the ages.

Genesis and Exodus also have a historical kernel. The events describe fit the historical context of the Middle East between 1800 and 1200 B.C. and indeed all the way to the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., during the Persian Empire, from which we have detailed recorded histories.

### The Bible as History

One thing is clear: the Hebrew people swept through Canaan and formed a powerful kingdom that reached its peak under King **David** around 1000 B.C. The book of Samuel, which chronicles David's reign, ranks with Herodotus as one of the first true histories ever written. That is, it is not a simple list of events like the Egyptians and Assyrians made; rather, it also analyzes those events, using the past to make decisions in the present and to plan for the future.

The author of Samuel precedes even Herodotus in drawing the moral lessons from history. His central question was, Do the private actions of a ruler have any impact on his public actions? God had raised David high, and under his leadership, Israel became a power. But at the height of his power, David had an affair with a Hittite mercenary's wife, then arranged the mercenary's death so that he might marry her.

This story offers some real historical details; Hittite troops from a small region in Syria served as mercenaries in the army of Israel around 1000 B.C. But as the story progresses, it also offers a moral lesson. The strife within David's family leads to rebellion and civil war, led by David's son

Absalom. Absalom's eventual death causes David even more pain than his rebellion. Through his private sins, David has brought this disaster on Israel and on himself. That is the consistent story of the Old Testament: The people called by God time and again defy his commandments and suffer for it.

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**The very essence of Judaism, in Old Testament times and today, is a belief in only one God. ... How did they come to develop beliefs so different from their neighbors'?**

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### **The Bible through the Ages**

The Old Testament also contains one of the world's first assertions of the principles of social justice—that a king has a moral duty to all of his subjects. This lesson resonated

with the founders of the United States in both positive and negative ways. The early colonial representative governments were certainly inspired by this notion. For many groups of colonists, America was a new Canaan—from the Puritans' desire to build a "city on a hill" to the later frontiersmen's drive to take this promised land by fire and sword. This vision of America is part of the legacy of the Old Testament.

The founding of the Kingdom of Israel also spoke across the ages to the Jewish people, as they were forcibly dispersed all over Europe and then all over the world. The Zionist movement, which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a renewed interest in the Hebrew language, eventually developed into a movement toward a restored state of Israel. This movement was driven forward by the horrors of the Holocaust; Jewish people all over the world realized that their continued survival was in their own hands.

After the British reversed their decision on establishing a new Jewish state, the cause was taken up by U.S. president Harry S. Truman, even though his most trusted advisors, including Secretary of State George Marshall, advised against it. While not an openly devout person, Truman believed in the historicity of the Bible and came to believe that God had promised the Jewish people a new Israel.



## **From Many Gods to One**

The very essence of Judaism, in Old Testament times and today, is a belief in only one God—monotheism. In this way, Judaism was far different from its contemporaries in ancient Greece, Rome, and Mesopotamia, not to mention China and India, where polytheism was the rule. How did they come to develop beliefs so different from their neighbors’?

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Egyptian Empire reached its greatest extent, stretching all the way into modern-day Syria. There arose in Egypt a sense that they were now a universal empire. Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (r. 1353–1336 B.C.) took this idea to a logical extreme, undergoing a conversion comparable only to that of the Roman emperor Constantine: He abandoned the traditional polytheistic religion of Egypt and became a monotheist.

Amenhotep’s god was Aten, the solar disk. He changed his name to **Akhenaten**—meaning “servant of Aten.” He converted his family and many high officials. He began leveling the temples to other gods and insisting that everyone throughout his realm worshiped Aten as the only god.

Akhenaten composed the beautiful “Hymn to Aten” and had it inscribed at his new capital city, which was also dedicated to Aten. It tells of a god of love and truth, one who is faultless and holy, unlike the scandalous gods of the Greeks and Egyptians. The new belief in Aten gave rise to an artistic style that broke with all the traditions of Egyptian art—fluid and magical, rather than static.

But Akhenaten’s singular focus on his new faith led to an ever-worsening situation on the frontiers of Egypt’s Empire. He failed to keep up his alliances with important rulers in Syria. The ordinary Egyptians, as well as displaced priests, chafed under Akhenaten’s fanaticism and wanted to return to their old gods, in whom they still believed. And so the empire crumbled. Akhenaten was probably put to death, and his son reconverted to the old gods.

## **The Legacy of the Hebrews**

The religion of Akhenaten died out, but the idea of one loving and perfect god did not. Akhenaten’s reign, according to the best of our archaeological evidence, occurred a generation or so before the Exodus; thus his ideas would

have been known to the Hebrews. Remember, too, the suggestion that Moses was himself an Egyptian. It is possible that Moses combined elements of the faith of Akhenaten with the traditional monotheism of the Hebrew people, influencing their faith and, through them, the three great monotheistic religions of the modern world—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The books of Genesis and Exodus, from the Near East in the 2nd millennium to the modern day, have shaped the history of the world like no other texts and continue to shape them today in ways both theological and political. The great lesson of these texts, which—like the ancient Hebrews—we seem to forget and relearn over and over, is that the human will to keep alive all that is best in this world may indeed lead us into crises and wrongdoing. ■

### Names to Know

**Akhenaten** (a.k.a. Amenhotep IV; r. 1353–1336 B.C.): Pharaoh of Egypt's 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty who established, for the first and only time in its ancient history, monotheism as the official religion of Egypt. He dismantled the traditional Egyptian priesthood, established a new imperial capital at Akhetaton (modern Tell el-Amarna), and led the development of a new artistic and architectural style in service of his religion. His cult, worship of the sun's disk under the name Aten, did not long survive his death. However, his idea of a single god who was loving, benevolent, and perfect may have influenced—or at least mingled with—the ancient Hebrews' ideas about Yahweh.

**David** (d. c. 962 B.C.): The second king of ancient Israel and the first to unite all the Hebrew tribes into a single kingdom. He conquered the Philistines and established Jerusalem as the kingdom's capital, thus defining Israel as a nation. His great success as a warrior and struggles with personal ethics mark him as an archetypical hero figure who rises to the height of power but is destroyed by his own *hybris*. But in both historical and mythological terms, he is also the archetype of the messiah, the anointed king of God's chosen people, a concept that would have resonance throughout the history of the Jewish people and, after the fall of Rome, all of Europe.

## Suggested Reading

Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*.

Redford, *Akhenaten*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think the Hebrews rejected the millennia-old tradition of Egyptian and Middle Eastern religions based on polytheism and anthropomorphic gods?
2. Do you believe that there are ideas too strong to kill?

# Aeneas—Rome's National Hero

## Lecture 16

Just as the stories of Theseus were the defining national statement for Athens and the Old Testament the defining national statement for the Jewish people, the *Aeneid* was defining national statement of the Roman Empire. It conveyed their hopes and aspirations, and it served to revitalize a sense of national pride in the wake of the civil war that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar.

In 29 B.C., Emperor **Augustus** commissioned the poet **Vergil** to create a great national epic. Augustus greatly admired Vergil's work, particularly the fourth of his *Eclogues*, which foretold a golden age. Augustus hoped to bring that age about. Part of his plan to do so was to revitalize the Roman people's sense of themselves, to convince them that they were destined to rule a world empire.

The *Aeneid* does all that and more. It uses mythology to create a national identity while conveying profound religious truths. It is a work of history, describing how the Roman people came into being. But it also asks the metaphysical question, What happens to the soul after death? Finally, it is an elegant propaganda statement, celebrating the achievements of Caesar Augustus.

### From Troy to Rome

The *Aeneid* tells the story a member of the Trojan royal family, Aeneas, who led a small remnant of Trojans to Italy after the fall of Troy, driven by fate and the anger of the goddess Juno. There, Trojans, Latins, and Greeks would come together into what would one day be the Roman people.

The poem begins with the wandering Trojans coming to Carthage, a city whose patron is the goddess Juno. (Part of Vergil's purpose is to explain why the Romans had to fight the Punic Wars.) Because it has been foretold that Rome will one day overthrow Carthage, Juno is determined to prevent the Trojans from reaching Italy.

After being driven by storms, Aeneas and the Trojans land near the mighty city of Carthage (in reality, Carthage wouldn't be founded for another 500 years). It is ruled by Queen Dido, who welcomes the refugees with a feast. As we have seen in other stories, the gods intervene to make Dido fall madly

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**This focus on justice and repentance in the afterlife has led many to consider Vergil a proto-Christian.**

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in love with her guest. Once again, a myth asks whether the gods themselves can control destiny.

Aeneas becomes Dido's consort, and together they begin building great structures and temples. Aeneas is utterly absorbed in his new love and new life until the

gods appear and ask him, "Have you forgotten why we saved you?" He replies, "I am pious Aeneas," and promises to fulfill his duty. He begins to prepare his ships for the journey—without telling Dido his plans. When she discovers Aeneas plans to leave her, she swears there will be eternal enmity between Carthage and Rome, and as he sails away, she kills herself.

Finally, the Trojans come to Italy, landing near where the ancient port of Rome, Ostia, would later be located. It's a place called Lavinium, the land of the Latins. Nearby, on what would one day be the site of Rome, was a small colony of Greeks ruled over by Evander. He, too, makes Aeneas welcome.

### **A Journey through the Underworld**

Aeneas did not stop at Rome—not right away. First, he went to Cumae, where he found a golden tree bough, his entry token to the underworld. He knows he must visit the underworld to learn how to complete his mission.

Once in the underworld, he crosses the river of death—just the way Gilgamesh did. On the other side, he finds both the Elysian Fields, where the souls of the just dwell in peace, and a region where the unjust must be cleansed of their wrongdoings. They literally hang in the wind. When these wrongdoers have paid the requisite penalties for their crimes in their earlier lives, they can be reincarnated. This focus on justice and repentance in the afterlife has led many to consider Vergil a proto-Christian.

Aeneas then sees the line of his own descendants, from Romulus and the heroes of the early Roman Republic, all the way to Caesar Augustus. Augustus, Aeneas is told, will gird with his power the whole of the world. Triumphs will be brought to him from far-off India and Britain. Under him, Rome will fulfill its true mission—to bring down the haughty and raise up the weak, to conquer those who make war on others and thereby bring peace to the world.

### **A New Hope**

Vergil's idea of the afterlife is a new one: a vision of hope and salvation based on living a just and true life. Aeneas's trip to the underworld is a symbolic death in itself; he emerges as a new person, fully understanding his mission. It will not be easy. He must fight a tremendous war against the Etruscans, led by their hero chieftain, Turnus. Ultimately, nothing can be achieved except by war. The final scene of the poem is of Aeneas killing his archenemy Turnus and Turnus's soul descending into the underworld.

Most scholars agree that Aeneas is an allegorical figure for Caesar Augustus; even the poem's earliest commentators thought so. The whole of the poem therefore is an allegory for what Caesar Augustus had to do, how he had transformed and would continue to transform the Roman world at the cost of his own self-interest. He would wade through blood to hold the Roman Empire together. He would make the Romans worthy of their mission to bring peace, justice, and prosperity to the world.

### **The Historicity of the *Aeneid***

The *Aeneid* is the most majestic example of a myth that conveys a higher truth—a higher truth about the destiny of the nation of Rome—while it simultaneously presents deep religious vision of the afterlife. But does it have a kernel of historical truth? Did a Trojan nobleman actually come to the shores of Italy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C., did a Trojan ship land there?

Archaeologists would say no. There have been no “Trojan” artifacts, whatever that would mean, found in the region. Yet we know that the founders of Rome were a blend of Latin, Etruscan, and Greek peoples; why not Trojans as well? The Athenians were very exclusive. The Jewish people were exclusive. But the Romans were inclusive, welcoming all people who

agreed to live by their laws. In A.D. 212, the government of the empire would grant every inhabitant of its territory the rights of citizenship, no matter their origins. This, ultimately, was the legacy of Aeneas and Augustus, the fruit of their duty to the gods. ■

### Names to Know

**Augustus** (a.k.a. **Gaius Octavius**; 63 B.C.–A.D. 14): Rome’s first emperor (*princeps*) and adopted son of Julius Caesar. He was arguably the greatest statesman in Western history. He created political structures that would bring two centuries of unprecedented peace and prosperity to the Roman world (the Pax Romana) and revitalized Roman patriotism after the ravages of civil war. Augustus took as his model Aristotle’s concept of the god tyrant as described in *Politics*, sacrificing everything for personal power and aggrandizement, yet somehow this personal quest for glory saved his nation.

**Vergil** (a.k.a. **Publius Vergilius Maro**; 70–19 B.C.): Roman poet and author of the *Aeneid*, arguably the most influential work of literature from classical antiquity. His father came from humble circumstances but acquired land and some wealth, so Vergil received an excellent education, studying rhetoric and philosophy in Rome. Vergil’s first major work of poetry, the *Eclogues*, is a collection of short pastoral poems based on the poetic models of Hellenistic Greece; the *Aeneid* is quite different, a heroic epic recounting the founding of Rome, probably written at the behest of Augustus. Vergil’s contemporaries recognized the poem as a classic, and such was its influence in later antiquity and the Middle Ages that the popular imagination turned Vergil into a proto-Christian and a magician.

### Suggested Reading

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, Book I.

Galinsky, *Aeneas, Sicily, and Rome*.

Vergil, *Aeneid*.

## Questions to Consider

1. If there is no historical kernel to the story of Aeneas, how do you explain the Romans choosing as their founder a foreigner from a conquered nation? To a superstitious people like the Romans, would that not seem bad luck?
2. The Italic peoples of the 8<sup>th</sup> century were confronted with a “more advanced” civilization—that of the Greeks. Many times in such circumstances, the “less advanced” culture is overwhelmed and destroyed. The Italic people were strengthened. Why?



# Romulus—The Founder of Rome

## Lecture 17

**B**y the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., there was general agreement that Aeneas had founded what would ultimately become the Roman nation but that Romulus had founded the actual city of Rome in 753 B.C. The story of Romulus and the foundation of the Roman Republic attracted the attention of great writers—in particular Livy, Plutarch, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

### Three Roman Historians

**Livy** was a historian who wrote in the last years of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. He had seen the civil wars that had almost destroyed Rome, the rise to power of Caesar Augustus, and the establishment of what was in fact a monarchy. Livy believed that liberty was the most noble of ideals but that the Romans were no longer capable of self-government; monarchy was the only solution. He was deeply interested in how Roman liberty was established in the first place, and some of the United States' founding fathers, including James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, found much to admire in Livy's writings.

**Plutarch** was perhaps even more admired. Born near Athens—but an Athens ruled by Rome—and writing in the late 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D., he composed a set of biographies called *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, in which he sought to pair a noble Roman with a noble Greek, for example Theseus with Romulus, with an emphasis on ethics and strength of character.

**Dionysius of Halicarnassus** is less well known today, although it is worth noting that the American founding fathers read him as well. They were particularly interested in his discussion of the Roman constitution.

All three writers admit that the early history of Rome had become surrounded with fables and half-truths, but they also agreed it was worth searching for the kernel of truth within. All three accept the historicity of Aeneas; his marriage to Lavinia, daughter of the king of the Latins; and his achievement in uniting Trojan, Latin, Etruscan, and Greek into the first Roman community.

### From Aeneas to Romulus

Given the archaeological evidence found at Troy, the historical Aeneas would have arrived in Italy no later than 1200 B.C., while the foundation of Rome was traditionally dated to 753 B.C. In between came the 13 kings of a dynasty founded by Aeneas's son, Ascanius, also known as Iulus, or Julius, claimed as an ancestor by both Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar. Julius founded a city called Alba Longa, "the long white city," so called for its long, white walls. It was about 15 miles eastward from Rome, up in the Alban Mountains.

One of the crucial lessons that the Romans learned from their history is that power corrupts. Amulius usurped the throne of Alba Longa from his brother Numitor, the 13<sup>th</sup> king. Afraid that Numitor's daughter, Rhea, would bring forth a son to overthrow him, he forced her to become a Vestal Virgin. These celibate priestesses kept the sacred fire of Alba Longa burning; the chastity requirement can probably be traced to the belief that sex uses up energy and would take away the energy of the fire.



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Romulus and Remus are frequently pictured with the she-wolf who, according to legend, discovered the abandoned twins and raised them as if they were her own pups.

Despite her uncle's precautions, Rhea became pregnant and claimed the father was Mars, the god of war. (Once again, we see the magical conception of a hero.) Furious but unwilling to anger a god, he had Rhea's twin sons, Romulus and Remus, put in a basket and set afloat in a river. The basket floated downstream and came to rest under a fig tree; this is why every Roman city had a fig tree in its forum. The babies were rescued by a she-wolf, who nursed them; thus, along with that fig tree, a statue of a wolf nursing twin human boys was also a common feature of Roman municipal complexes.

The boys were discovered and taken in by a shepherd and his wife, but rumors of their real identity spread. So at the age of 18, Romulus and Remus made their way back to the city of Alba Longa, overthrew their evil great-uncle, and restored their grandfather to his throne. This quest complete, they returned to where they had been raised and were determined to erect a new city there.

### **The Founding of Rome**

Romulus wanted to build on the Palatine Hill, better for defense, Remus on the Aventine Hill, better for farming; in fact, the pair rarely agreed on anything. So they asked the gods to send a sign (a Roman tradition that would eventually be administered by its own priesthood, the augurs). Romulus immediately spotted 6 vultures landing on the Palatine; then Remus saw 12 land on the Aventine. They proceeded to argue about whether seeing them first or seeing more of them was more important.

Finally, Romulus decided to build his city alone. He plowed a furrow around the borders of his city—which would become another widespread Roman tradition, in colonies as far-flung as Spain and Turkey—called the pomerium. He then began building a wall just outside this furrow. But Remus mocked his efforts, calling the wall puny, and jumped over it. This was Romulus's breaking point; he stabbed and killed his brother. Thus, the foundation of Rome began in fratricide. Later, Livy wondered if this event wasn't a sort of original sin that the Romans had to expiate with civil war. Note also that, like Jason, Theseus, and others, not every deed the hero does is clean and fine.

Next Romulus needed inhabitants for his new city. He invited anyone who wanted a fresh start in life to come to Rome and attracted a rag-tag group of men, but no women. Romulus thus came up with the idea of inviting his neighbors, the Sabines, to a festival in what would later become the Roman Forum. The Sabines came, bringing their wives and daughters and sisters. After a good deal of wine had been drunk, each Roman grabbed a Sabine

**Unlike Athens, which made it almost impossible for a foreigner to become a citizen, the Romans welcomed immigrants from the city's very foundation.**

woman and ran off with her behind the walls of Rome. Called the rape of the Sabine women, the Roman tradition of grooms carrying their brides over the threshold commemorates this event.

The Sabine men laid siege to Rome but could not capture the city. Finally, the Sabine women themselves asked their former

husbands to desist; they wanted the Sabines and Romans to become one people. Unlike Athens, which made it almost impossible for a foreigner to become a citizen, the Romans welcomed immigrants from the city's very foundation.

### **Rome Becomes a Power**

Romulus then began to carry out a foreign policy to Rome the most powerful town in the neighborhood. He waged war against the Latins and the Sabine holdouts. He conquered the Sabine chief in hand-to-hand combat and took his armor back to Rome, thus instituting the Roman traditions of a commander claiming *spolia opima*, “the richest of spoils,” and the triumphal procession.

Romulus also picked as many as 300 men he considered valuable advisors and founded the first Roman Senate. This body would guide and direct the policy of Rome all the way down to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in A.D. 476, serving continuously under ancient kings, within a free republic, and under the Caesars. The families of the first senators became the patricians; the rest of Rome's citizens were the ordinary folk—the plebeians—a division that also lingered until the fall of Rome.

## The End of Romulus and the Historical Kernel

One day, Romulus simply disappeared. The people panicked and rioted, accusing the Senate of tearing him to pieces and scattering the body. But, one well-trusted man said Romulus was taken into heaven to become the god Quirinus, who would ever after stand at Jupiter's side and protect the Roman people. Romans continued to sacrifice to Quirinus until their official conversion to Christianity.

Is there any truth to the story of Romulus? Many historians still insist not. But as early as 1870, archaeologists discovered huts on the Palatine Hill dating to the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., giving much weight to the traditional founding date of Rome. Grave goods near Rome indicate the merging of Sabine and Roman cultures in this period as well. Most strikingly, in 2005, Andrea Carandini discovered in the Roman Forum a 10-room house dating from the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century. He insists—quite reasonably—that this was the palace of Romulus. ■

### Names to Know

**Dionysius of Halicarnassus** (fl. 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.): Greek-born historian of the Roman Republic. His *Roman Antiquities*, like the later work of Plutarch, was intended in part to persuade the conquered Greeks that their Roman overlords were worthy rulers of a civilization whose greatness rivaled their own. He was also an accomplished rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric whose theory of rhetoric, *imitatio* (imitation of great authors), eclipsed Aristotle's *mimesis* (imitation of nature) as the dominant style of Latin writers.

**Livy** (a.k.a. **Titus Livius**; 59 B.C.–A.D. 17): Roman historian—the great historian of the Roman Republic. He wrote his history “from the founding of the city.” This undertaking was inspired by Augustus, with whom he was on friendly terms. Livy wrote of the glory days of Rome, bringing his narrative down to his own day. His history was part of Augustus's program, including the appearance of independence, as when Livy praised Pompey and Brutus. As did Vergil, Livy became a classic, shaping all subsequent understanding of the history of the Roman Republic. His high reputation in later centuries is shown by Dante's reference to “Livy, who does not err.”

**Plutarch** (A.D. 46—c. 119): Roman biographer and essayist. Plutarch was a Roman citizen from a wealthy family in the Greek city of Chaeronea. He had an excellent education and traveled widely, spending considerable time living and lecturing in Rome, but he preferred to live in his home city. He was well connected in governing circles and was respected and rewarded by the emperors Trajan and Hadrian; he was priest of Apollo at Delphi and played a significant role in the revival of the oracle under these rulers. His *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* was written in illustration of the ideal that Greece and Rome were joined together in a common mission of civilization, an idea that reflected the official view of emperors from Augustus onward.

### Suggested Reading

Carandini, *Romulo e Remo*.

Plutarch, “Romulus” in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Romulus and Moses are two founders of nations who began life being set adrift in a river and then rescued. Can you think of other examples? What higher truth might be conveyed by this common story?
2. Which do you think is more logical: that the Romans dreamed up the whole story of Romulus to explain the name of their city, or that their city was named for its founder?

# Lays of Ancient Rome

## Lecture 18

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**T**here's a strong kernel of truth to the story of the foundation of Rome. There is an even stronger kernel of truth to the story of the foundation of the Roman Republic. What the historian Livy proposed—and what America's founders saw as so intriguing in Livy—is that Rome had to be nurtured by kings to become such a strong republic.

### **Power Corrupts**

Romulus was Rome's first king. Among the following kings, the second was good, the third was pretty good, and the fourth was still pretty good, but then power began to corrupt. By the year 509 B.C., the seventh Roman king, Tarquin, ruled not as a monarch but as a tyrant. He seized whatever he wanted. He taxed the Romans heavily and forced them into labor on public construction projects. The Romans groaned under Tarquin's tyranny, but the discontent finally came to a head with a typical act of a tyrant: the outrage of a free and noble woman.

In 509 B.C., Tarquin was besieging the Rutilian city of Ardea. Among the soldiers were some patrician youths, including Tarquin's son Sextus and his friends Lucius Junius Brutus and Collatinus. In a fit of boredom, these young men began to debate among themselves whose wife was the most chaste. To settle the matter, they decided to ride back to Rome and spy on their wives.

Collatinus's wife, the beautiful Lucretia, was the clear winner, so much so that Sextus became obsessed with possessing her. While the camp slept, he returned to Rome to Collatinus's house and, using threats against Lucretia's life and reputation, raped her. Once Sextus left, Lucretia immediately contacted her husband and father to explain what had happened, then killed herself—not because she blamed herself for the rape, but because she wanted to remain an example of chastity to future Roman women.

### **The Bravery of the Romans**

For the third young man, Lucius Junius Brutus, this crime was the fuel for rebellion. He incited a rebellion whose aim was not only to drive out Tarquin

and his family but to end the monarchy itself. Tarquin was driven from Rome but hired the Etruscan king Lars Porsenna and his troops to take Rome back. The Etruscans had more soldiers, and the Romans were not as trained for war as they would later become.

The Etruscans were encamped across the Tiber River from Rome. At the time, there was only one bridge—a wooden bridge—that crossed the Tiber. This is where the Romans concentrated their defense. For a time, it looked like the Etruscans were going to drive the whole Roman army back and be able to cross the bridge, but three brave Romans stood forth: Horatius the

**Porsenna was so impressed that ... he realized he could never defeat such a foe, and he took his armies home.**

One-Eyed and two comrades. They stood on the bridge as the rest of the Romans retreated and held off the Etruscan attack.

Brave as they were, they were only three men, and it became clear that the Etruscans were going to overwhelm them. Horatius turned

to his two friends and told them to cross the bridge and chop it down behind them. They objected, asking him how he would get across. “Let me worry about that,” he said.

Thus, Horatius alone held off a whole army while the bridge was chopped down. He then turned, still clutching his shield and sword—because no Roman would throw those away—leapt into the Tiber River, and swam back to the Roman side.

There were many soldiers as brave as Horatius in the Roman army. For example, when it became clear that the Romans could not defeat the Etruscans in battle, 100 young Romans swore an oath to assassinate Lars Porsenna. They drew lots, and a man named Gaius Mucius made the first attempt.

Mucius swam across the river and sneaked into the camp, but he mistook Porsenna’s richly dressed treasurer for Porsenna himself and killed the wrong man. He was captured and threatened with torture by fire, but Mucius



thrust his own right hand into the flames until it burned off. Porsena was so impressed that, when he heard 99 more Romans would follow Mucius, he realized he could never defeat such a foe, and he took his armies home.

### **The Price of Freedom**

Rome was free, but freedom always comes at a price. The Roman Republic was established in 509 B.C., led by the senate and two consuls, freely elected commanders-in-chief of the Roman armies.

Brutus and Collatinus were one elected Rome's first two consuls. Their term of office was not without great difficulty. Some of Rome's patricians, who had more power and privilege under Tarquin, plotted to restore Tarquin to the throne. Among the plotters were Brutus's own sons. With his own hand, he executed every one of the conspirators, including his sons. That was emblematic of the civic virtue of the Romans—their patriotism, their willingness to put the good of their country above their individual and family interests.

### **The Value of Patriotism**

These stories of early Rome were told over and over again, down through the generations, to young Romans. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., Polybius wrote a history of the rise of the Roman Empire. Polybius himself was a Greek who had been brought to Rome as a hostage and served as a tutor in the house of the Scipios.

Polybius's history was intended to show his fellow Greeks why, in the course of one generation—between 202 and 167 B.C.—Rome had become master of the world, conquering even the more cultivated and technologically advanced Greeks. He gave one simple explanation: the Roman constitution. It was a balanced constitution in which the people were the ultimate authority; where the consuls' power was balanced by a wise Senate; and it separated the power among the judicial, legislative, and executive branches. Polybius, not coincidentally, was more often cited in the ratification debates for the U.S. Constitution than any other ancient authority.

Polybius also said that the best constitution will fail if citizens are not patriotic. The Romans did everything they could to raise their children to

be patriots. Funerals, for example, were occasions for publically recounting the great civic deeds of the deceased and his ancestors. The favorite winter's tales were stories of heroes and of great ancestors who performed their duty to the state. While modern historians often attempt to deconstruct the stories of the great figures of history, one has to wonder whether the unvarnished truth is always preferable for a nation's well-being compared to the great stories—or great myths—which speak of patriotism.

One of the greatest authors of 19<sup>th</sup>-century England believed in the power of great stories to inspire patriotism. Thomas Babington Macaulay read in Polybius about how these tales of Roman heroes were told generation after generation. In 1842, he wrote a magnificent set of poems called *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, trying to recreate these stories as they might have been told around the hearth in an ordinary Roman's home. It is interesting to note that one of the few academic successes of the young Winston Churchill was his recitation of the whole of Babington Macaulay's poem about the bravery of Horatius and the Romans who defeated Lars Porsena. ■

### Suggested Reading

Carandini, *La Leggenda di Roma*.

Livy, *Livy: History of Rome*, Book I.

### Questions to Consider

1. Do you agree with Polybius that the teaching of patriotic history is essential to preserve a republic?
2. Do you agree that state-salaried professors teaching in the universities of autocratic Prussia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had a vested interest in dismantling the stories of Roman patriots?

# Alexander the Great in History

## Lecture 19

In the generation in which the American founding fathers and the proponents of the French Revolution were educated, the cornerstones of a university education were the *Iliad*, Livy, Vergil, and the Bible. All were taught as being historical fact.

But in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, these writings began to be deconstructed, criticized, and dissected. All of this was done in the name of higher truth and critical honesty, but political agendas also played a role. The stories of the birth of the Roman Republic sounded dangerous to a France that had endured Napoleon and replaced him with a weak-willed monarch. The *Iliad*'s emphasis on warfare in an age that was craving peace was disturbing. And to criticize the Bible was to criticize all authority.

We have now reexamined these works and uncovered kernels of historical truth in each of them. However, we have yet to ask how a kernel of historical truth is transformed into a far more elaborate story. How does history turn into myth? How does history turn into tales that might be literally false but also convey a higher truth? To understand this process, we will look at a figure who functioned in the full light of history yet was transformed into a figure of romance and myth: Alexander the Great.

### The Historical Alexander

Alexander was born in 356 B.C., the son of King **Philip** of Macedonia, probably the greatest Greek statesman to that time, and his queen, Olympias. Philip was a great diplomat but also invented a new form of warfare and a new set of equipment for his soldiers. He conquered the Greeks and established himself as leader of a Greek coalition; his goal was to lead that coalition into Persia, liberate the Greek cities along the coast of Asia Minor, and rule them as well. Just as he was preparing for this assault, he was assassinated, and his 20-year-old son Alexander assumed the kingship of Macedonia.

Alexander's led his first military campaign at the age of 16, defeating a Thracian attack on the Macedonian border and establishing the city of Alexandropolis. (Alexander and Philip each named several cities after themselves.) At 18, Alexander led the cavalry attack at the decisive moment of the Battle of Chaeronea, where Macedonia put an end to the freedom of the Greek city-states. So he was no untried youth when he took the throne.

As king, Alexander immediately reestablished Macedonian control over Greece, lest the Greeks think Macedonia would fall into chaos without Philip. He then spent one year (335 B.C., in fact) campaigning in the north. He crossed the Danube River, received the tribute from the Gauls. Returning south, he put down a revolt in Thebes and destroyed the city as an example to others. He did all this in part to gain the trust of his army. In fact, everything Alexander did was marked by great foresight, the ability to see and address a problem before it becomes a problem. The Macedonians, especially the soldiers, began to believe Alexander was more than human; he was divine.

### **Alexander's Conquest of Asia**

In 334, he led 40,000 troops across the Hellespont, hurled his spear into the soil of Asia, and declared, "I take all of this as territory won by the spear." Within one summer, Alexander had achieved his father's goal, liberating the Greek cities of Asia Minor. He also displayed his further skills as statesman by understanding that each city had its own set of values; thus he overthrew the tyrants who had been supported by the Persians and established democracies in these cities.

But Alexander was not finished. He convinced his soldiers that, to keep the Persians out of these Greek cities, they had to defeat the king of Persia, Darius III. Alexander and his armies spent the winter conquering the interior of Asia Minor, overtaking cities and tribes that the Persians had not even been able to conquer. From this campaign comes the story of the Gordian knot, the tangle that, legend held, only the person destined to become master of all Asia could untie. In unique Alexander fashion, we are told, Alexander simply cut it in half.

Such was Alexander's reputation that the Persian commander at the Cilician Gates simply withdrew his troops, rather than fight. In November 333 at

the Battle of Issus in Syria, Alexander's men routed a Persian army of over 10 times their number, and Darius himself fled rather than face Alexander in hand-to-hand combat. Rather than chase Darius, he spent nine months subduing the city of Tyre, demonstrating another key to his greatness: Whenever he began a campaign, he stayed the course—no distractions.

### **Alexander's Destiny**

Alexander passed into Egypt, still ignoring Darius, and let his troops rest while he pondered his destiny. A true hero understands that he or she is meant for one specific purpose; for Alexander, that purpose was to conquer the world and create a peaceful brotherhood of humankind under his rule.

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**A true hero understands that he or she is meant for one specific purpose; for Alexander, that purpose was to conquer the world.**

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He began to believe that the Egyptians had one thing right: he, as a great ruler, was the son of a god—Amun-Ra, the supreme god of the Egyptians, whom the Greeks equated with Zeus.

Alexander rebuilt the temples that the Persians had let fall to ruin and paid the priests to crown him as pharaoh in the ancient ritual. He

also appointed Egyptians to govern Egypt. This began his policy of using local governors and permitting local customs—not imposing Greek values on the Middle East.

Now it was time for his appointment with destiny and Darius. In the fall of 331, he confronted Darius's army of one million men at the Battle of Gaugamela. His brilliant generalship and his personal courage brought about a decisive victory. Shamefully, Darius fled again, understanding at last that Alexander did not care about surviving the fight, only about eternal glory. City by city, Persia fell. When he met Darius's mother, she declared, "I wish Alexander were my son." Thus, he was already winning the hearts of the Persians. In July of 330, Alexander found Darius dead, assassinated by his own officers.

Alexander's troops were now getting eager to go back to Macedonia, but he convinced them that unless Afghanistan were conquered, the eastern Persian Empire would rise to fight again. So from 329 to 327, in campaign after campaign, Alexander became the only leader in history to conquer Afghanistan.

### Onward to India

In the meantime, he had treated the body of King Darius with all honors, burying him in sacred tombs of the Persian kings. More and more the Persians looked on Alexander as their king. He conquered the great rock of Sogdiana, in modern-day Uzbekistan. He was feasted by Sogdiana's ruler, Oxyartes, after the victory, and agreed to marry Oxyartes's daughter Roxane to secure the loyalty of the Afghan people.



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**Alexander the Great's dream of a worldwide empire was cut short by his premature death.**

Still Alexander pushed into India, promising his men gold and glory. On the banks of the river Hydaspes, he met his most noble opponent, the great Maharaja Porus. Once again, his strategy completely outfoxed a very capable general, and his cavalry was able to defeat Porus's elephants. When the battle was won, instead of killing Porus, he asked Porus to be his friend. He gave more land to Porus, and for as long as Alexander lived, Porus was his honored and trusted ally.

### Alexander's Last Days

Finally, Alexander's men demanded to turn back. Alexander turned back toward Babylon, which he intended to make the capital of this world empire.

He required 80 of his officers and some 10,000 of his men to marry local women so that a new race might be born—neither Macedonian nor Middle Eastern but only subjects of Alexander, the ruler chosen by God.

He was planning a campaign against Carthage when he was struck by a sudden fever. As he realized the fever was fatal, he asked that all of his old soldiers pass by as he lay on the couch. One by one, he took them by the hand. Some of them reached down to kiss him. His men asked the oracle of the god Marduk whether to let Alexander stay in the city or take him to an island in the river where it was cooler. The oracle responded, “Leave him here, for that is a better thing.” The Greeks believed it is best to die young. So Alexander died, not yet 33 years of age, having won the hearts of the people of the Middle East and having conquered as no one has before or since. ■

### Name to Know

**Philip II** (a.k.a. **Philip of Macedonia**; 382–336 B.C.): The 18<sup>th</sup> king of ancient Macedonia (r. 359–336 B.C.) and father of Alexander the Great. While his accomplishments are often overshadowed by his son’s, he worked a tremendous transformation in the Greek world that laid the groundwork for Alexander’s empire building. By a mixture of diplomacy and warfare, he raised Macedonia to the first position among Greek states; from that point on, Greece (including Athens) would be ruled by monarchs, rather than democratic or oligarchic assemblies. Alexander’s plans to unite the Greek world and to conquer Persia were an outgrowth of Philip’s own ambitions, which were cut short by his assassination.

### Suggested Reading

Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why does Alexander remain the only foreigner in history to conquer Afghanistan?
2. What does Alexander teach us about bringing stability to the Middle East?



# Alexander the Great in Romance

## Lecture 20

The story of Alexander from the preceding lecture is based on the work of **Arrian**, or Lucius Flavius Arrianus, a Roman administrator, experienced general, and philosopher who wrote a biography of Alexander at the request of the Roman emperor Trajan, who reigned at the start of the 2nd century A.D.—the height of the empire. Alexander was Trajan's role model; like Alexander and Augustus, Trajan believed in granting citizenship and tolerating the ethnic diversity of the conquered.

By that time, a number of bizarre stories had crept into the so-called histories of Alexander, and Arrian states quite specifically that he wants to set the record straight. To do so, he returns to two eyewitnesses: Ptolemy and Aristobulus.

Ptolemy was almost certainly the half brother of Alexander, Philip's child by a noble Macedonian mistress. He was one of Alexander's favorite and most trusted generals, and, after Alexander's death, ruled Egypt as pharaoh. Aristobulus was an engineer officer who also followed Alexander all throughout his campaigns. Their accounts of Alexander generally agreed; when they did not, Arrian chose Ptolemy over Aristobulus.

### From History to Myth

However, a heroic figure like Alexander begins to attract myths even in his own lifetime. For example, one story told how King Philip saw his wife Olympias mate with a god in snake form—Alexander's true father. Another told how no rider could break Bucephalus, Alexander's gigantic and magnificent war horse, until the 13-year-old Alexander came along. This latter story was told in Alexander's own lifetime by his soldiers. Other stories involved Alexander's sexual exploits; for example, he once spent 13 days in his tent with an Amazon—and when she staggered away, he quipped, "Come back. We're just getting started!"

In the case of Alexander, by the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., there were already not just stories tacked on to factual history but full-blown romances. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> and

3<sup>rd</sup> centuries A.D., this mythological Alexander was the standard vision. It is one of the things that Arrian wrote to correct.

The romance of Alexander was attributed to a real historian, **Callisthenes**, who had traveled part of the way to India with Alexander and had written a panegyric history of him. Today, the author is called Pseudo-Callisthenes, because the romance was written well after the death of the real historian. We don't know the real author. What we do know is how popular it was. It forms part of the romantic literature of Persia and Afghanistan. It is central to campfire songs in Egypt today. It was translated into ancient Ethiopian, into Latin, and later into French and English. All through the Middle Ages, this mythological Alexander was one of Europe's most popular characters.

### **The Four Themes of the Warrior-Hero Myth**

The romance of Alexander allows us to delineate the central themes that make up stories of a hero that have transformed from history into myth:

- A magical birth and childhood that underscore what the hero will become—his great qualities.
- A set of fabulous military campaigns.
- A quest for immortality in some form.
- A tragic death through treachery.

### **The Magical Childhood**

All major versions of the Alexander romance include a magical childhood for Alexander. He is neither Philip's son nor the son of a god but the son of a scheming Egyptian magician-pharaoh, Nectanebo. Egypt plays a prominent role in the Alexander romance, and it's generally thought the first versions were composed in Alexandria, Egypt. This pharaoh had long used a voodoo-like magic to defeat his enemies, making models of the armies and burning them. When it ceased to work, he fears the gods have turned from him and flees to Macedonia.

He is honored at the Macedonian court, where he falls in love with Olympias. She tells him her marriage is unhappy and childless. Nectanebo says he think she should have a child by the great god Amun-Ra of Egypt and that he can assist her if she gives him a bedroom adjoining hers. Through a series of machinations (including a snake costume!), Nectanebo sleeps with Olympias twice. Olympias became pregnant, and Philip became suspicious, but he

had a dream of Olympias with a golden disk with a lion, the sun, and a spear on her body, which Nectanebo promptly told him was a sign she was pregnant with Amun-Ra's child.

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**Alexander's defeat of Darius is almost a footnote to all the campaigns that never happened in places Alexander never went.**

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Alexander in real life was a handsome man; in the romance, he is tiny, has one black eye and one

white eye, hair like a lion's mane, and sharp teeth like little nails. He is also a trickster; all through the romance, Alexander will never fight a battle if he can win it by trickery. His father's death is also wildly described. In reality, Philip was assassinated by a member of his bodyguard, but in this story the assassin carries off Olympias as well, and Alexander must save her.

### **The Military Campaigns**

The romance of Alexander includes battles that never took place—such as the conquest of Rome. Alexander's defeat of Darius is almost a footnote to all the campaigns that never happened in places Alexander never went.

In one story, Alexander doesn't want to go up against the full army of Darius, so he disguises himself, crosses a frozen river, and visits Darius's court saying he is an ambassador from Alexander. As they are dining together, Alexander starts blatantly stealing golden goblets from the table, then runs. The entire Persian army pursues him back across the frozen river, which cracks under their weight and drowns them. In the romance, he wins the Battle of Issus and the fight with Porus through similar trickery, versus the reality of his brilliant military strategy.

### **The Quest for Immortality**

The historical Alexander wanted to march to the end of the world, as does the Alexander of romance. But the romance Alexander succeeds, coming to a wondrous land where the men have no heads and an eye in their stomach. He encounters a group of tall, thin men who carry spears and wear lion pelts; this may be a reference to the Maasai people of East Africa. He goes to war with a people he calls the Apple Eaters, who eat one of the Macedonian women. He defeats an army of centaurs by tricking them into a deep ditch.

Alexander also visits a vast desert, and at the far side of the desert is a land of total darkness, then the Sea of Death—not unlike the travels of Gilgamesh. Instead of Utnapishtim, however, Alexander finds giant, killer crabs whose claws are filled with pearls. He ties a cage to two giant birds, and the birds take him up into the sky. It is on the return journey that Alexander's cook, trying to make a meal, discovers a spring that grants eternal life. He and one of Alexander's concubines drink from it and run away together without telling anyone where the spring was hidden, so Alexander never becomes immortal.

### **The Tragic Death**

After the failed quest for eternal life, Alexander visits a temple and is told by the oracle that he will die by treachery. He returns to Babylon, where he is poisoned by his trusted general Antipater, who had quarreled with Olympias and feared Alexander's vengeance. As he is dying, he crawls from his bed toward the Euphrates River, trying to disappear so people will say he was taken up to heaven. But his wife Roxane drags him back to bed, where he dies.

The romance ends by saying, "We have told the story of Alexander to show how he was the bravest and most virtuous of warriors." I think, rather, this romance reflects the values and attitudes of the Roman Empire in which it was first composed. Rome had a professional army; the ordinary Roman citizen did not want to fight and had no concept of sacrifice, patriotism, or the real life of a warrior hero. Such stories may not be able to survive in a society based entirely on materialism and self-indulgence. ■

## Names to Know

**Arrian** (a.k.a. **Lucius Flavius Arrianus**; c. A.D. 86–146): Historian, Roman politician, and friend to Emperor Hadrian. His *Anabasis* is a Greek-language work that describes the Asian expedition of Alexander the Great. Arrian based his work on accounts from Alexander’s half-brother, the pharaoh Ptolemy; the engineer Aristobulus; and other eye-witnesses. His focus is on Alexander’s military tactics and prowess, rather than Alexander the person.

**Callisthenes** (a.k.a. **Callisthenes of Olynthus** c. 360–c. 328 B.C.): Greek historian and great-nephew of Aristotle who accompanied Alexander the Great as the official historian of Alexander’s Asian expedition. Notorious for his self-importance, Callisthenes clashed with Alexander over the issue of *proskynesis*—Alexander’s demand that the Greeks prostrate themselves to him as to a god. This rift and other clashes led Alexander to arrest Callisthenes, who eventually died in prison. Callisthenes penned several works on Greek history and an extremely important account of Alexander’s expedition. The more sensational anecdotes from Callisthenes’s work were incorporated into the Alexander romance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., whose unknown author is thus called Pseudo-Callisthenes.

## Suggested Reading

Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Greek Alexander Romance*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How do you define a hero?
2. Do we have heroes today?

# ***Beowulf*—Historical Roots and Heroic Values**

## **Lecture 21**

**T**he early 8<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* has special meaning to speakers of the English language. The oldest surviving major work of literature in what would become the English language, it is one of the most important, one of the most profound, one of the most provocative of all the Germanic epics.

### **Who Were the Germans?**

The Germanic peoples were well known to the Greeks and, by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., were one of the greatest threats to the security of Rome. Julius Caesar campaigned against the Germans in Gaul, and attacks by the Teutons and the Cimbri around 106 B.C. led to a dramatic transformation in the Roman military, in which the citizen militia was replaced by a professional army.

The land of the Germans was amorphous, stretching from the Danube River and the modern Czech Republic in the south to Holland and the Low Countries in the north; it reached into France in the west and the steppes of Russia in the east. Rome held the Germans at bay for centuries, but in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., Germanic raiders began ravaging the edges of the empire. By the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Romans were no longer able to defend their territory in Britain against the attacks of Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Danes. The Roman garrisons were withdrawn, and the Romanized Britons were pushed west, becoming the Welsh. The southeastern portion of the island of Britain became England—the land of the Angles.

### **About the Epic**

Sometime around A.D. 730 or 740, probably in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, a singer of tales somewhat like Homer sang one of the most beautiful of these Germanic war epics, commemorating the deeds of the 6<sup>th</sup>-century hero Beowulf. Like Homer, he is singing of a long-gone age, the time when the Danes were ruled by King Hrothgar, who, in his most desperate hour, called on the Geatish hero Beowulf.

*Beowulf* was composed in Anglo-Saxon, a predecessor of modern English. In fact, about 55 percent English vocabulary comes from Anglo-Saxon. The epic was lost for centuries, then rediscovered in a private library in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At first scholars dismissed it; the first edition of the *Oxford Collection of English Verse* called it “pretty small beer.” But important critics—including **J. R. R. Tolkien**—began to see the unity of the poem and the care with the way the wordsmith had created an entire world and conveyed high moral truths.

### **The Call to Adventure**

When the poem opens, Hrothgar is king of the Danes. He is the great-grandson of the powerful and just king Scyld Scefing, who made the Danes a great power among the Germans. In his wealthy old age, Hrothgar built a great hall called Heorot; archaeologists have uncovered the ruins near Lejre, Denmark, of a remarkably large hall dating to around A.D. 560—precisely the time and place for this to be the real Heorot. This allows us to date some of the events of the poem to sometime between 520 and 560.

For many years, Hrothgar’s warriors brought much plunder from faraway places to Heorot, and huge, merry feasts were held there. But such happiness could not last; God sent a monster, the offspring of Cain, to remind Hrothgar that all human deeds are fleeting. (The poet of *Beowulf* was a Christian, but the poem betrays an uneasy alliance between his Christian faith and his dyed-in-the-wool Germanic traditions of blood lust, war, and vengeance.)

One night, while Hrothgar and his warriors slept in the hall—a common practice in Anglo-Saxon culture—the door burst open, and in came the monster Grendel. Grendel grabbed one of the warriors, popped his head off, drank his blood, and ate his body, bones and all. Then he goes after another and another and another. When morning comes, the whole hall is filled with blood and dead bodies. Night after night the monster returns, and no matter how brave they are, none of the Danes can defeat him.

Years pass, and Hrothgar has fewer and fewer retainers. Heorot stands almost empty. But the story of his troubles crosses the sea to the land of the Geats, part of what we would call Sweden today. One warrior, Beowulf,

whose father Hrothgar had assisted many years before, decides to cross the whale way—that is, the ocean—to Denmark to help him. (That phrase, “the whale way,” is a kenning—a lovely little verbal circumlocution common to Anglo-Saxon poetry.) Fourteen stalwart warriors from throughout the land of the Geats join him on this quest.

### **Beowulf versus Grendel—and More**

Hrothgar welcomes Beowulf to Heorot with a great feast. Beowulf introduces himself to Hrothgar’s retainers with stories of his great feats, but one of Hrothgar’s men, Unferth, becomes jealous of Beowulf, resentful of this foreigner who thinks he can do what Hrothgar’s men could not. Unferth calls Beowulf out about a swimming contest he lost to a Norwegian king called Breca, saying Breca saved Beowulf from drowning. Beowulf corrects him: It was Beowulf who saved Breca, carrying the king in his left arm while killing sea monsters with his right.

That night, Hrothgar and Hrothgar’s men leave Heorot while Beowulf’s men take their place sleeping in the hall. Grendel arrives in his usual, violent fashion and eats one of Beowulf’s men. Beowulf wakes, grab’s Grendel’s arm, and a great fight ensues. They go banging and crashing through the hall, until finally, with one giant tug, Beowulf tears Grendel’s arm off, and the monster runs off to die.

Hrothgar and his people return to Heorot, and once again they hold a feast to honor Beowulf. They present him with treasures, which Beowulf distributes to his men like a good Germanic king. What Hrothgar and Beowulf don’t know is that Grendel was not the only monster in the region. Grendel has a mother, and like any mother, she is enraged by the death of her child. That night, she attacks Heorot, killing and destroying, and makes off with Aeschere, the king’s oldest and most trusted counselor. Here the poet reminds us that evil can strike even in the midst of joy.



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**Beowulf defeated Grendel without the aid of weapons.**



Beowulf is undaunted and swears he will kill Grendel's mother all by himself. The Danes and Geats ride to the lake where she dwells and demons and serpents infest the waters. As a peace offering, Unferth gives Beowulf

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**Here the poet reminds us that evil can strike even in the midst of joy.**

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his sword, Hrunting, to slay the monster with, and Beowulf accepts it. Beowulf then dives into the lake. It takes him a whole day to reach the bottom, but there he finds a large cave, the lair of Grendel and his mother. Beowulf and Grendel's mother engage in a mighty battle.

Beowulf quickly discovers that Hrunting is dull and useless. He sees another sword, the monsters' plunder from another warrior. He snatches it up and uses it to slash Grendel's mother to pieces. The monster is defeated, but her blood dissolves the sword.

Beowulf has been gone so long that Hrothgar and his men retreat to Heorot, but Beowulf's men remain by the shore awaiting their leader. When Beowulf returns, the feasting is even grander, and Hrothgar feels—rightly this time—that the evil plaguing his land has been vanquished. Yet at the banquet, a singer sings tales of arrogant, greedy Germanic kings and the terrible fates they suffered, a warning that evil could return if a king forgets his duty.

Beowulf does not forget; he distributes some of his treasure to his men, then returns to the land of the Geats gives the rest to his king, Hygelac (a documented historical figure), who rewards Beowulf with lands and a great hall of his own.

### **The Inevitable Fall**

Eventually, Beowulf becomes king over the Geats and ruled gloriously for 50 years. But like the aged Hrothgar, Beowulf is troubled in his sunset years. A dragon is awoken in Beowulf's kingdom by a thief who stole a cup from the dragon's hoard. The dragon ravages the land, so Beowulf and his kinsman Wiglaf set out to kill it. They defeat the dragon, but Beowulf is mortally wounded.

Beowulf's funeral is described in great detail and matches what we know of Germanic king burials. A great tumulus is built and heaped with weapons and treasure. The Geats place Beowulf's body on it and raise a magnificent funeral pyre. The Geatish women march around the fire and sing a funeral dirge for their great king.

A strong kernel of history is found in *Beowulf*, from historical figures and locations to the practices of Germanic kings, but more than that, the poem conveys the values of the Germans—their beliefs in war, honor, and fate. And just as in the *Iliad*, we learn that all great heroes must die, but their fame will endure. ■

### Name to Know

**Tolkien, J. R. R.** (1892–1973): Oxford University English professor and fantasy writer who was among the first critics to champion *Beowulf* as a literary masterpiece. His own heroic epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, became one of the top-selling publications in Western history. Tolkien is often credited with creating the high fantasy genre—novels and stories set in a magical version of medieval British or Scandinavian culture, usually featuring a quest narrative as the main plot. Although as in many other literary forms, many late 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors began to deconstruct high fantasy's cultural assumptions, many others have sided with Tolkien and the classic warrior values his novels endorse.

### Suggested Reading

*Beowulf*.

Lapidge, *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Did you know that J. R. R. Tolkien was a distinguished scholar of Old English literature and an authority on *Beowulf*? Does what you know of Tolkien's novels give you insight into *Beowulf*, or vice versa?

2. What higher truths are conveyed by the recurrent theme of the hero who must fight monsters? Is it simply good versus evil, or is there more to this trope?

# King Arthur—Fact or Fiction?

## Lecture 22

**H**istorians have tentatively, but resolutely, affirmed the historicity of King Arthur. Although opinions on the details differ, there is little doubt that in the darkest days of England's history, there stood forth a champion who, with his knights, held firm the banner of Christian civilization against the forces of a valiant, disciplined, and barbarous foe.

### Arthur in History

The stories of King Arthur as we know them belong to the high ages of medieval chivalry, but their historical kernel lies in Britain's dark ages, the same period in which *Beowulf* was composed. When, as we noted earlier, in A.D. 410 the Roman emperor Honorius told the Roman Britains that the empire could no longer take care of them, various Roman Britons began to struggle for power.

One of these Britons was a local king—a tyrant, really—called Vortigern. To gain advantage over his rivals, he hired the war bands of the Anglo-Saxon brothers Hengist and Horsa as mercenaries in his cause. They came, and then they stayed. To make them leave, Vortigern invited them to a large festival where he would pay them off once and for all. The Anglo-Saxons were supposed to come unarmed, but they hid daggers in their shoes and slaughtered the Britons; Vortigern's land was then theirs for the taking. Archaeology supports the kernel of this story; starting around A.D. 420, Angle, Saxon, and Jute burials began to move from the coast inland.

### Arthur in Poetry and Prose

About 650 years after these events, the historian **Geoffrey of Monmouth** compiled his *History of the Kings of Britain*. In this work we find the first full-blown description of the reign of King Arthur and his role in fighting the invading Anglo-Saxons. Geoffrey's Arthur was the son of Uther Pendragon, who was the son of Ambrosius Aurelianus—a good Roman name—the first war chief (*dux bellorem*) to stand up to the Saxons. Traces of Arthur's story are found earlier, in 7<sup>th</sup>- and 8<sup>th</sup>-century Welsh poetry and annals.

Around the historical kernel of Arthur, the most remarkable set of stories grew. From Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Arthur story was taken up by the brilliant French poet **Chrétien de Troyes** sometime around A.D. 1190, and Arthur's court was turned into a model for the age of chivalry. Chivalry was a social code that grew from the political and economic realities of feudalism, in which the king was no more than first among equals. Its central values were honor, courage, and romantic love.

There is little room for romantic love in the fierce pages of the *Iliad* or of *Beowulf*, but the love of a knight for a lady fair is central to the ideal of chivalry. Said lady is almost always married to someone else, so their love remains chaste. Still, the knight performs all manners of great deeds so that he might be worthy of his love.

Next came *Le Morte d'Arthur* by **Thomas Malory**. Malory was a knight who served in the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). It was published in 1485 by one of England's first printers, William Caxton. In fact, Caxton edited Malory so heavily that one could make an argument for joint authorship. *Le Morte d'Arthur* is written in magnificent English. It has as its great theme the idea of Arthur as the emblem of the noblest values of chivalry. It has spoken across the



The legends of King Arthur began with a Dark Ages warlord and became entwined with later chivalric ideals.

ages—it is the main source for television and movie versions of Arthur's story to this day—even though our own values are very far removed from those of chivalry.

### Arthur's Birth

As with many heroes, Arthur's story begins with his miraculous birth. His mother is the beautiful Igraine, the wife of the duke of Cornwall. His father is Uther Pendragon, the high king of the Britons. They meet at a feast, and Uther is utterly taken with Igraine's beauty. When Igraine reports to her husband the duke that his lord has been making eyes at her, the duke is

enraged and withdraws his support from Uther. War breaks out, and Uther besieges the duke at his castle of Terrible while Igraine is stashed at the duke's other stronghold, Tintagel.

**The appearance of the fantastic in a supposedly historical narrative would not have surprised anyone in the Middle Ages.**

Suddenly the magician Merlin appears on the scene. The appearance of the fantastic in a supposedly historical narrative would not have

surprised anyone in the Middle Ages. From the Old Testament to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, from the Holy Roman Emperor to the slaves in the field, just about everyone in the Western world believed that magic was real and sprang from a pact with the devil, although magic could be used for evil or good. Merlin was accepted as a real person; some stories even said he was related to Ambrosius Aurelianus and thus to Arthur.

Merlin appears to Uther Pendragon and strikes a bargain. He tells Uther he can arrange a tryst with Igraine, but the result will be a son, and Merlin wants the right to say how that son is raised. Uther agrees, so Merlin disguises Uther as the duke of Cornwall. Uther goes to Tintagel and sleeps with Igraine while in disguise; meanwhile, the real duke dies at Terrible. Igraine does not discover the deceit until the next morning. When the baby is born, Merlin takes the child, and Igraine, now a widow, agrees to marry Uther; Arthur is thus legitimized after the fact.

### **Arthur's Youth**

Arthur is turned over to a knight named Sir Hector and is raised believing he is Hector's son. When Arthur is about 14, he, Hector, and Hector's real son Sir Kay ride to Westminster to a Christmas festival where the lords of the realm will determine who will be the next king over the Britons (Uther having passed on). Magic enters the story once again, and the famous sword in the stone appears at the festival. An inscription on the stone says that whoever can withdraw the sword will be high king of Britain. Many knights try, but none succeeds in withdrawing the sword.

Central to the festival is a joust. As Kay is about to compete, he realizes he has forgotten his sword. Arthur offers to retrieve it but realizes too late he does not have enough time to run to their camp and back before Kay must fight. Then he remembers the sword in the stone nearby. He grasps it and, sure enough, is able to draw it from the stone. He hands it over to Kay, but Hector realizes it is not Kay's sword. He asks Kay and Arthur for an explanation but can't believe what he is told. He takes the boys back to the stone and has Arthur put the sword back. Hector tries to draw it with no success, and so does Kay, but Arthur has no problem drawing the sword.

By this time, they have attracted a crowd. All the knights at the festival try the sword again, but only Arthur can draw it. Thinking it absurd that this boy should be their king, they agree to reconvene at Candlemas (February 2) to try again. They do, and still only Arthur can draw the sword. They try again at Easter and once again at Pentecost. Finally, at Pentecost, the lords of Britain accept the truth, and Arthur is made king, thanks to the magical sword Excalibur.

### **Arthur's Early Kingship**

One of Arthur's first acts as king is to obtain a queen. With Merlin's advice, he chooses Guinevere, the most beautiful woman in the kingdom and daughter of one of Arthur's vassal kings. Guinevere's father gives Arthur the Round Table as a wedding present. The knights who will sit around it are to be true Christians, worthy of their lord and worthy of their faith.

Arthur reigns from Camelot, which Malory tells us is the old name for Winchester. Archaeologists, however, identify the hill fort at Cadbury in

Somerset as the likely site of Camelot. Wherever it was, in myth Camelot ceases to be a real place and becomes a sort of utopia, the symbol of English values and aspirations, hopes and dreams.

The seats around the Round Table are ultimately filled with the finest knights of all of Christendom—men like Sir Gawain, Sir Percival, and Sir Lancelot. Only one seat remained empty, the Siege Perilous—“dangerous seat”—destined for the perfect, chaste knight who would find the Holy Grail.

Soon after Arthur takes power, an ambassador comes from the Emperor of Rome, called Emperor Lucius in the tale, demanding the traditional tribute from Britain. Arthur will not pay tribute to a king of Rome, and thus he leads his army all the way to Rome, conquering France and Italy along the way, and is finally crowned Roman emperor.

It seems Arthur’s Britain has entered a golden age, but as we have seen before, nothing so perfect can last. The chivalrous love between the knight Lancelot and Queen Guinevere will lead them into betrayal, and the quest for the Holy Grail will tear the brotherhood of the Round Table asunder, as we will soon see. ■

### Names to Know

**Chrétien de Troyes** (fl. A.D. 1165–1180): French poet of chivalric romance. Chrétien was a court chaplain attached to the court of Champagne. He wrote some of the most famous medieval chivalric romances, particularly *Lancelot*, or *The Knight of the Cart*. Chrétien’s work explores the relationship between the knight’s devotion to his military duty and his love of the unattainable lady—the ways in which these two passions both interfere with and reinforce one another. Chrétien’s take on the Lancelot character—complex, conflicted, at times almost absurd—is arguably the reason this figure continues to capture our imaginations today.

**Geoffrey of Monmouth** (1100–1155): Bishop and historian whose *History of the Kings of Britain* (*Historia Regum Britanniae*) introduced King Arthur to English literature. The byname “of Monmouth” indicates that he was born near the English-Welsh border. In his youth, he was a cleric at Oxford



University, but later in life he was appointed bishop of the diocese of St. Asaph in northern Wales. His *History* incorporates the legendary heroes of the British Isles as well as heroes of antiquity; for example, it asserts that the British people, like the Romans, were founded by a refugee from the Trojan War—in this case, Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas.

**Malory, Thomas** (fl. late 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D.): English writer of uncertain identity who composed *Le Morte d'Arthur*, one of the best-known treatments of the legends of King Arthur and Camelot. The few clues available to his identity are that he was a knight during the War of the Roses and a prisoner while he composed *Morte*, leading many scholars to believe he is Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, serving the Lancastrian earl of Warwickshire, Richard Beauchamp. The catalog of this Malory's alleged unpleasant exploits (among them theft, assault, kidnapping, and rape) are strangely at odds with the values espoused in his writings, leading some to doubt this is the right Thomas Malory and others to suggest *Morte* was written during a period of mature reflection and remorse.

### Suggested Reading

Malory, *Morte d'Arthur*.

Matthews, *King Arthur*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do the chivalric values expressed in Arthurian legends differ from the heroic values of the *Iliad*? How are they similar?
2. Why did the image of Camelot speak to the generation that admired and elected John F. Kennedy president of the United States?

# In Search of the Holy Grail

## Lecture 23

**T**he quest for the Holy Grail began, as so many quests do in Arthurian romance, with a damsel in distress. Lancelot was riding through a deep forest when he was stopped by a crowd. They begged him to rescue Lady Elaine, the daughter of King Pellès, who had been in torment for five long years in a bubbling stew pot.

### **The Magical Birth of Galahad**

Lancelot rescues the lady, and she tells him she was placed in the pot by the infamous witch Morgan le Fay, who was jealous of Elaine's beauty. His duty done, Lancelot tries to go, but Elaine insists he have a meal with her and her father. During the meal, King Pellès tells Lancelot that he is descended from Joseph of Arimathea, who brought Christianity to Britain.

Lancelot spends the night in Pellès's castle, and while he is sleeping, Elaine takes on the appearance of Guinevere and goes to his room. Lancelot forgets his vows of chastity toward his lady love and takes the woman he thinks is Guinevere to bed. In the morning, the cold dawn shows it was Elaine, but rather than recoil in horror, Lancelot makes love to her again, compounding his sin. Elaine reveals to him that what has passed between them was foreordained to bring the perfect knight into the world: their son, Galahad.

Lancelot returns to Camelot and his chaste romance with Guinevere. But years later, on Pentecost—not only the anniversary of Arthur taking the throne but the day that Jesus's apostles were given the power to speak in tongues to spread Christianity to the world—a young man in glowing armor arrives and sits in the Siege Perilous. All others who had tried to sit there were struck by lightning, but this time wonderful perfumes fill the room. This is Galahad.

### **The Grail Quest Begins**

Guinevere is furious that Lancelot has been with another woman, but the rest of Arthur's court, including Arthur, is thrilled to have this noble young knight among their company. In a repeat of Arthur's own story, another sword in a

stone is discovered, and this time Galahad pulls the blade out. Arthur, though pleased that Lancelot has such a wonderful son, fears that Galahad's arrival spells doom for the brotherhood.

That night, during the Pentacost feast, the chamber of the Round Table is filled with darkness. The knights have a vision of maidens walking through the air around a table lit by candles, on which rests a vessel covered in a satin cloth. Galahad takes this as a sign that his quest for the Holy Grail—the fated quest of the knight of the Siege Perilous, must begin. Arthur weeps as each of his knights takes an oath and embarks on his own Grail quest, knowing all but one of them must fail, but that's the point of a quest: to strive for glory, even if you know you will fail.

### **Lancelot's Quest**

Lancelot is among the most eager to undertake this quest, but he meets frustration after frustration. He comes to a falling-down chapel in a wasteland and is overcome with fatigue. He lies down to sleep, then sees the maidens and the Grail coming out of the chapel, but he cannot move. A hermit is there; he tells the maidens, "This knight could have been worthy to find the Grail, but he sinned." Then Lancelot falls asleep and dreams of 150 bulls in a meadow; two are white, one white with a black spot, and the rest black. When he wakes, the hermit tells him he is one of the blackest bulls, sunk deep in sin. The white bulls are Galahad and Percival; the spotted bull is Bors.

Lancelot gives up the quest and makes his way to the



The Teaching Company Collection.

**Sir Galahad proved himself the only knight worthy to find the Holy Grail.**

Sea of Death, where he spends half a year in a boat on the shore. Then he drifts out into the sea in his rudderless boat. He lands on an island where he finds a castle guarded by two lions. Inside, there is another chapel, once more containing a vessel draped with satin, as well as a spear dripping with blood. Again he is told he is unworthy, so he gives up the quest and returns to Camelot.

### **The Discovery of the Grail**

Galahad, Percival, and Bors take up the quest together. They came upon a hermit who told them how Joseph of Arimathea, escaping Jerusalem with the Holy Grail, met King Evelake in the land of Sarras. Joseph converted Evelake to Christianity and gave him a holy shield—white with a red cross

that was drawn in Joseph's blood.

**Ironically, transformation is precisely what Bors finds when he returns to Camelot, but not for the better.**

That shield was hidden away by this hermit until Joseph's last descendent, Galahad, arrived to claim it.

Joseph also told them he hid the Holy Grail in Sarras, so the three companions crossed the sea. There

they came across a priest saying Mass, who asked them what they were seeking. They told him, "The vessel that Christ ate from at the Last Supper, that Joseph of Arimathea used to catch Christ's blood as Christ hung from the cross." A voice—God's voice—tells them that the priest's vessel is the Grail, and they may partake of a wafer from the vessel.

When they have done that, Galahad says, "Now I am content to die," and angels bear him bodily up to heaven. Percival decides to stay in Sarras and become a monk. Bors stays with Percival but does not take monk's vows; his task is to return to Camelot after Percival's death and tell the world of their successful Grail quest.

### **The Origins and Conclusion of the Grail Myth**

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned at the end of all four of canonical Gospels as a leader of the Jewish community in Jerusalem; he went to Pontius Pilate and asked to take down and bury Jesus's body. The story of the Grail does

not appear in the Gospels, and while its origins are not certain, it first appears in the Arthur legend in the work of Chrétien de Troyes sometime around 1190 as part of the Percival legend. From there, the story grew and became fundamental to the Arthur myth.

The Holy Grail story is meant to convey the higher truth of the centrality of the Mass to the Christian faith. It is a symbol of divine transformation—the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ. Ironically, transformation is precisely what Bors finds when he returns to Camelot, but not for the better. Unworthy knights have claimed seats at the Round Table, among them Arthur’s illegitimate son, Mordred.

### **The Fall of Camelot**

Mordred and the unworthy knights taunt Arthur with rumors of Guinevere and Lancelot’s affair and persuade Arthur to spy on his queen. On May Day, Guinevere sets out with a group of knights and ladies to celebrate the coming spring, leaving Arthur and Lancelot at Camelot. At sunset, Guinevere takes 10 trusted knights as her guards and goes to an empty castle to spend the night. Mordred and his companions follow them to the castle and battle the 10 knights. The knights drive Mordred’s group away, and Guinevere takes her wounded knights into the castle to treat them. Lancelot arrives for a tryst, but Guinevere tells him what has happened and that he must sneak in by a window. He tears bars off the window to be with her, wounding his right hand in the process.

The next morning, Mordred returns with more men, breaks into the castle, and—although Lancelot tries to claim he was wounded in the battle the night before—finds Lancelot’s blood on the queen’s sheets. They are lost. Convicted of treason (for adultery against a king is treason), Guinevere is sentenced to burn at the stake. But Lancelot appears in disguise to prove Guinevere’s innocence in trial by combat. He drives Mordred from the field, and Arthur takes Guinevere back. This drives Mordred to open rebellion against Arthur. Sin has led to civil war.

The armies of Modred and Arthur come together, but Arthur doesn’t want to fight those he once commanded, so he offers Mordred a truce. While the king and Mordred are negotiating, a snake appears—just like in Genesis. A

knight draws his sword to kill it, and the knights watching from a distance think Arthur and Mordred are fighting. A terrible battle ensues. Arthur and Mordred kill each other. In shame for the suffering they caused, Guinevere becomes a nun and Lancelot a monk.

We can believe that Arthur is as real a figure as William the Conqueror or Alfred the Great, a warlord who led the British against the barbarous Angles and Saxons. But he is also the vehicle by which the sacred mysteries of Christianity and the ideals of chivalry became universal and enduring. ■

### Suggested Reading

Malory, *Morte d' Arthur*.

Matthews, *King Arthur*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think the Holy Grail was such a potent symbol in the Middle Ages?
2. In considering the lives of Lancelot and Guinevere *after* Arthur's death, what life lessons do you learn?

# Vikings in America?

## Lecture 24

The Norse sagas are a rich source for the myths of the Germanic heroic age, that period between A.D. 793 and 1066 in which the Vikings raided far and wide, terrorizing Europe from Britain to Constantinople. In the meantime, they also discovered America.

### **Ingstad: Heir to the Viking Heroes**

In the 1920s, a young Norwegian attorney named **Helge Marcus Ingstad** quite suddenly left his home and career to live among the Inuit of the Northwest Territories of Canada. He stayed there for three years, learning the Inuit language, learning how to hunt and trap and live off the land. He chronicled his adventures—his quest, in point of fact—in a book called *Canada: The Land of Feast or Famine*.

Turning to anthropology full time, Ingstad lived among the Lapp of Norway, then the Apache in the American Southwest and several other Native American tribes. He recorded their folklore and samples of their dying languages. Then in 1960, at 61 years of age, Ingstad decided to search for proof of the legend that said the Vikings had ventured as far as North America. This was largely looked on as a crackpot idea.

As far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from time to time a local newspaper from a small town in Canada or the United States would report that a Viking artifact had been found nearby. One set of Viking runes (their alphabet) was found carved into a rock in Oklahoma, although no one could prove them authentic. Still, in 1960, your average historian dismissed all this evidence as fraudulent and the Icelandic sagas that seem to describe visits to North America—called Vineland in the sagas—as fabrications. Ingstad thought differently.

### **A Viking Settlement in Newfoundland**

Ingstad believed that the *Greenlanders' Saga* (*Groenlendinga saga*) and the *Saga of Erik the Red* (*Eiríks saga rauða*) established that, somewhere in the northern reaches of North America, Vikings had landed and settled

for awhile. Being a superb seaman, he explored the coast of North America. In June 1960, he arrived at Lancy Meadows (or L'Anse aux Meadows, "Jellyfish Cove"), Newfoundland and asked his usual question of the locals: Are there any barrows nearby—small hills that look out of place in a flat meadow? A man named Decker told him that there were such barrows on his property and that, from time to time, someone found small iron objects there.

Decker gave Ingstad and his wife, the archaeologist **Anne Stine Ingstad**, permission to dig on his property. The Ingstads spent seven cold Newfoundland summers working on the site. They uncovered eight structures that clearly established Viking settlement, including houses and a blacksmith's shop. The objects found dated the settlement to about A.D. 1000, and the condition of the site indicated that it was abandoned peacefully; for some reason, the Vikings simply packed everything up and sailed away. The dig is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most exciting archaeological finds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Vikings Sail West**

As Schliemann believed in the historicity of Homer, so Ingstad believed in the historicity of the Norse sagas. These sagas are part of the same oral tradition as *Beowulf* but were composed in Old Norse, an ancestor of the modern Scandinavian languages. Of these languages, Icelandic is the most archaic.

The sagas preserve stories of Viking blood feuds. If someone killed your relative, a Viking man was not only obligated to kill the murderer but several of his relatives. The surviving relatives in turn had to kill and several of your relatives, and so on.

None of these blood feuds was more violent than those carried out by Erik Thorvaldsson—Erik the Red. The feud between Erik's father Thorvald and his enemies was so serious that King Harald of Norway exiled Thorvald and his family to Iceland, which had been settled around the year 874. Vikings came to Iceland for its good farmland and established the world's longest standing democratic assembly, the Thing, which governs Iceland to this day.



Erik Thorvaldsson inherited his father's hot temper. In 982, Erik killed his neighbor Thorgest in a dispute over some valuable roof beams, the Althing sentenced him to three years of exile. Erik left Iceland and sailed west. First he came upon a large island, most of it glaciers, but with a coastline dotted with lovely green meadows. He returned to Iceland and sold this land to the farmers there, calling the place Greenland. Erik settled in Greenland, too.

Sometime around 990, a merchant named Bjarni Herjólfsson who sailed between Norway, Iceland, and Greenland was blown off course and came to a land fringed by dense forest. He did not explore it, but he told his friend Leif Ericson, son of Erik the Red, about the rich potential of this virgin forest. Leif and Erik sailed west again in search of it. They came first to a land of

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**As Schliemann believed in the historicity of Homer, so Ingstad believed in the historicity of the Norse sagas.**

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flat rocks they called Helluland, which may be what we call Baffin Island, then Markland, somewhere on the coast of Labrador.

At the next place they stopped, they found rivers full of salmon, a forest full of moose and other game, and acres and acres of grapes growing

wild. Thus they named the place Vineland. They wintered there, returned to Greenland with timber, then returned to explore the rest of Vineland. This is when they built the settlement at Lancy Meadows, which they called Leifsbudir, "Leif's little place."

### **The Vikings in America**

The Vikings explored what is now eastern Canada and the northeastern United States, perhaps as far south as the Chesapeake Bay. At one point they encountered a group of natives—whom the Vikings called *skraelings* but were probably Mi'kmaq—sleeping under canoes and killed them. One escaped to alert the tribe, and all the tribe's warriors returned and engaged in a violent battle with the Vikings, driving them back north. Thorvald was killed in the battle, and his body had to be left behind.

One of the last Viking voyages to North America was made by Freydis, Erik the Red's daughter. She formed a business partnership with two men, Helgi

and Finnbogi, intended to trade with the *skraelings* and make a permanent settlement. Freydis, her husband Thorvard, Helgi, Finnbogi, five women, and a number of other men reached Vineland around the year 1010. At first things went according to plan, but when it came time to divide the profits from their trade, Freydis gave Helgi and Finnbogi a much smaller portion than they'd originally agreed on. The fight escalated, and Freydis had her husband kill the men and killed the women herself.

Freydis and her husband returned to Greenland, and that was the last time the Vikings would visit Leifsbudir until Ingstad rediscovered it almost 1,000 years later. The story raises some interesting “what ifs”: What if the Vikings had established an enduring settlement in North America long before the Spanish and English came? How would history be different? Would the epidemics that ravaged the Native Americans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century have struck them earlier, or would they have gained immunity along the way and survived to resist or befriend the Europeans? ■

### Names to Know

**Ingstad, Anne Stine** (1918–1997): Norwegian archaeologist who headed the digs at L’Anse aux Meadows, Canada, that proved the existence of long-term Viking settlement in North America in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. She was the wife of Helge Marcus Ingstad, an explorer and writer whose passion for the Norse sagas inspired the pair to make the discovery of Vinland their life’s work. Although her husband often gets the lion’s share of the credit for the discovery at L’Anse aux Meadows, Mrs. Ingstad’s archaeological expertise was vital for the day-to-day work of uncovering, cataloging, and preserving this remarkable site.

**Ingstad, Helge Marcus** (1899–2001): Norwegian writer and adventurer who—with the help of his wife, archaeologist Anne Stine Ingstad—discovered the first definitive proof of long-term Viking settlement in the New World some 500 years before Columbus’s voyage. Educated as a lawyer but entirely self-taught in the discipline that became his life’s work, his biography often reads like a classic hero’s quest—abandoning his comfortable existence in his homeland in search of glory and treasure, in this case, intellectual treasure. Even Ingstad’s extraordinarily long life (he lived

to 101) recalls the heroes of his beloved Norse sagas, those myths in which his life's work revealed the kernel of historical truth.

### Suggested Reading

Diamond, *Collapse*.

Ingstad, *Westward to Vinland*.

Jones, *Vikings*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do you think the history of the Western Hemisphere would have been different if the Viking settlements had taken root, flourished, and spread to South America by 1492?
2. Do you think “the discovery of America” is an appropriate term?

# Vergil the Magician

## Lecture 25

**N**ot all heroes are warriors. Myths are also attracted to poets and men of learning. This is how the Roman poet Vergil was transformed into a magician hero by the Europeans of the Middle Ages and how he became a beloved figure to both ordinary people and high nobility.

### **The *Sortes Vergilianae***

In 1643, England was in the early stages of what would become an ugly civil war, and King Charles I was discussing his troubles with one of his closest advisors, Viscount Falkland. Charles wished that he could somehow look into the future. Falkland suggested that they try *sortes Virgilianae*—“the Vergilian lottery”—using the writings of Vergil as a divinatory text. The process was simple: Just throw open a volume of Vergil and point to line at random, and the line will tell you what the future will bring.

Unfortunately for Charles, Vergil’s message to him is a line from Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, in which Dido curses Aeneas: “May he never rule over men again, and may he die violently in a far-away land.” Six years later, Charles would be deposed and beheaded by his own subjects—albeit not in a far-away land but in his own kingdom. Powerful prophecy or simple coincidence, this belief in the *Sortes vergilianae* well into the early modern era stands as one of the most enduring proofs of the medieval ideal of Vergil the Magician.

### **Dante’s Vergil**

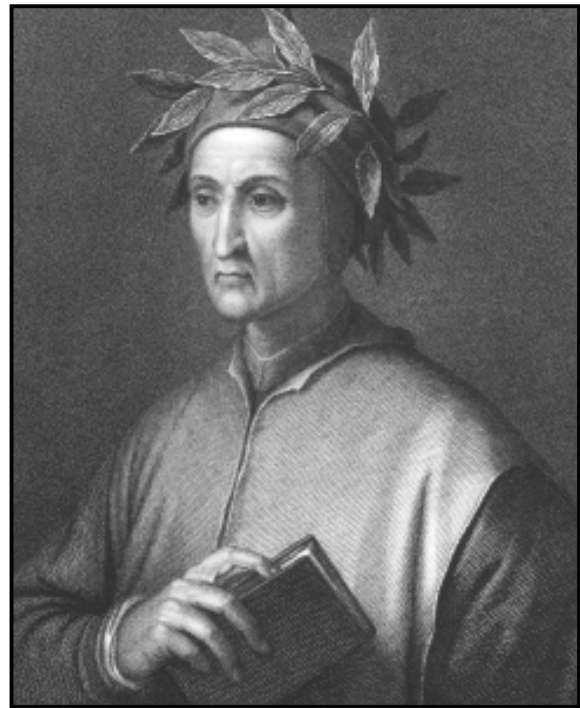
One of the noblest expressions of this view of Vergil is found in **Dante’s** *Divine Comedy*. The author is his own main character and narrator who, in the middle of the journey of life, finds himself lost in a dark wood. Vergil appears to him there and offers to help Dante learn the secret to salvation. He will do so by serving as his guide through hell, purgatory, and heaven.

How is it that a pagan poet who died 19 years before the birth of Christ becomes the guide on this journey through a very Christian afterlife? We are told almost immediately, as Vergil leads Dante across the river of death,

that he is one of the noble pagans, people like Plato and Homer whose learning, philosophy, and poetry prepared the way in the minds of humankind for the coming of Christ.

### **Vergil the Christian?**

For the church, Vergil was a Proto-Christian—a Christian before Christ had come. In part, this was due to dominance of Vergil’s works in school curricula. The *Aeneid* was the classic par excellence. It was studied and learned and memorized. Even in the early Christian period, elaborate commentaries and allegorical interpretations of it were written.



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**Dante’s Vergil in *The Divine Comedy* is the best known example of medieval reverence for Vergil.**

What set the seal on Vergil as the preparer of the way for Christ was one of his earlier poems, composed around 39 B.C.: “Eclogue IV.” Vergil’s *Eclogues* were about rustic matters, shepherds and farming, expressed in the form of elaborate and learned poetry. “Eclogue IV” became fundamental to the Christian interpretation of classical literature.

The poem speaks of “The great line of the centuries begin[ning] anew” and “the birth of this child under whom the iron brood shall at last come to an end and a golden race spring up.” There were many Romans, including Vergil, who believed that the civil war that led to Julius Caesar’s assassination and Augustus’s rise to *princeps* was expiating the original sin of fratricide—Romulus killing Remus. The poem goes on to say this wondrous child will rule the world in peace and abundance and that “the serpent, too, will perish.” Vergil seems, to Christian ears, to be foretelling a new Garden of Eden. He was read by Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D. as a prophet of Christ.

A classical scholar might try to tell a Christian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century that the child described in the poem probably referred to expected birth of the

son of Vergil's mentor, Alpheus Pollio, to whom the poem is dedicated, or it may have referred to the hoped for heir to Augustus. But that Christian would argue that, whatever Vergil thought he was writing, he was clearly foreshadowing the birth of the Christ.

### **From Prophet to Magician**

As the light of learning in Western Europe grew dim in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, Vergil was still known and reflected upon. But sometime before the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, another view of Vergil began to develop. In an extremely learned work, *Policraticus* by John of Salisbury

(c. 1160), we find a reference to a most curious kind of Vergil. He tells us that Vergil made a bronze fly according to astrological doctrine, and with that bronze fly kept all the flies out of Naples.

**As the light of learning in Western Europe grew dim in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, Vergil was still known and reflected upon.**

Suddenly, we're introduced to Vergil the Magician, far removed from the historical Vergil. Author

after author would tell stories about Vergil the Magician, and they were very popular with the general public. In fact, with the invention of printing in 1453, stories about Vergil the Magician—his miraculous birth, his miraculous education—were among the most popular chapbooks, the cheap pulp paperbacks of the day.

This new Vergil, we're told, was born to two Mantuan magicians of Celtic descent—sort of. Vergil's real father was the god Jupiter. The god fell in love with Vergil's mother, Magia, and impregnated her via golden flakes sprinkled into her wine cup. At Vergil's birth, flowers blossomed even though it was wintertime, and the whole of the earth all around where he lay became filled with flowers. He immediately began to walk.

At the age of seven, Vergil encountered a magical black cloud that transformed itself into a bull. Vergil transformed himself into a white bull. The two creatures clashed, and Vergil prevailed—this was taken as a sign that he was ready to begin his education as a poet. Vergil studied under

Lucretius the Epicurean—a real historical figure. Although Vergil had much of the epicurean in him—the desire to have leisure without any troubles—this mentorship is not based in historical fact.

After seven years of study, Vergil is headed home to Mantua. One night, sleeping outdoors, he has a dream in which he is told to pick up the stone he is using as a pillow. He does so and, upon waking, discovers it was not a stone but a black book that holds the key to all knowledge. He begins to carry out deeds of remarkable magic, but also to teach. Thus Vergil the Magician's adventures are accompanied by the adventures of his pupil, Asinius Pollio.

The adventures of Vergil the Magician's career reinforce the values of medieval Christianity. For example, he wanders into villages asking for milk. If people give him milk he blesses their house and they become wealthy. If they refuse to give him milk, all their milk sours. Another whole set of tales centers around Naples, the city where the historical Vergil built his villa and was eventually buried. Vergil's bones took on the sanctity of a saintly relic, and it was said that as long as his bones were hidden in Naples, the city would never be captured. ■

### Name to Know

**Dante** (a.k.a. **Dante Alighieri**; 1265–1231): Florentine poet and author of the *Divine Comedy*, a monumental epic poem in 100 cantos sketched against the background of the universe. Born to a family of modest means, he served his city in minor public offices but suffered exile in the political upheavals of 1301–1302. He gained literary fame from his *Vita nuova* and scholarly attention for his *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*. The death of the lovely Beatrice—Dante's unrequited love and a central figure in the *Divine Comedy*—in 1290 evoked the major changes in his thought and writing.

### Suggested Reading

Comparetti, *Virgil in the Middle Ages*.

Vergil, *Aeneid*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What aspects of Vergil's description of the afterlife caused the Christian church to consider him a proto-Christian?
2. Can you think of any modern author who might live on in legend? Should we expand our search to entertainers and sports figures?



# The Battle of Kosovo

## Lecture 26

On June 28, 1914, the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand came to Sarajevo, Bosnia, to announce his plan to bring progress, prosperity, new jobs, and better medical care to his Serbian subjects. His vision was to turn the Austro-Hungarian Empire into a sort of United States of Austria in which each of its provinces and peoples—Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Serbs—had autonomy and could preserve its own customs and languages.

One member of the archduke's entourage warned him that the date he chose to deliver his speech was a poor choice—potentially a dangerous one. It was the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, in which the Ottoman Turks destroyed the Serbian Empire. The archduke, failing to see the relevance, went forward with his plans, despite further warnings from his spies that assassination plans were circulating.

The archduke's failure to understand Serbian history led to tragedy not just for himself but for the world. Within weeks of his assassination by Gavrilo



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**The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip can be traced directly to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Battle of Kosovo.**

Princip—a member of the Black Hand, a secret society dedicated to Serbian nationalism—the whole world was at war. When that war ended four years later, 11 million were dead.

### The Battle of Kosovo

At Kosovo Polje, “the field of the blackbirds,” on June 28, 1389, the army of the Serbs led by Prince **Lazar Hrebeljanovic** met the army of the Ottoman Turks led by the Sultan **Murad I**. By battle’s end, the flower

**In the end, the might of  
Serbia was broken forever,  
and the Tsar lay dead on the  
field of battle.**

of Serbian nobility had perished and an independent Serbia would exist no more. The Serbs would be subjugated to the Ottoman Empire from that day to the year 1815.

The Ottoman Empire grew out of the decline of the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire, with its capital at Constantinople. The Turks were originally a Central Asian people related by custom and language to the Mongols. A series of battles, including a major victory over the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071, led to the fall of the Christian Byzantine emperors and the eventual rise of the Islamic Osmanli Turks.

From Anatolia (that is, modern Turkey), they expanded their sphere of influence into the Balkans and by 1389 were determined to push through Serbia into the rest of Europe. Serbia at that time was an empire, ruling a large part of the Balkan Peninsula. It had its own Orthodox church independent of the bishop of Constantinople. Kosovo Polje was a strategic choke point; Serbia’s Tsar Lazar knew that the Turks had to be stopped there or they would conquer the empire and could march all the way—as they ultimately did, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century—to the gates of Vienna.

The Turkish Army at Kosovo Polje was about 40,000 strong, the Serbian Army about 30,000 strong. The Turkish Army was a superb military machine, and Sultan Murad was an experienced, brave, and capable general. In addition to a well-trained cavalry and an infantry armed with composite bows—superior to European longbows—they employed an irregular cavalry

whose ranks lived entirely off of plunder. The irregulars would spread fire and destruction, rape and pillage ahead of the battle to weaken and terrorize their opponents. Few armies ever defeated the Turks, and then only by employing Turkish-style tactics.

The army of the Serbs, by comparison, had a poorly trained cavalry and an infantry carrying inferior weapons. They were brave, but they were no match whatsoever for the Turks. Therefore, their plan for the battle was to capture Sultan Murad and hold him as a hostage, forcing the Turks to withdraw.

Although the Turkish cavalry did tremendous damage to the Serbian infantry, for a time it looked like the Serbian cavalry might break through one wing of the Turks. But at just that moment, according to tradition, one of the Serbian lords, Vuk Brankovic, withdrew his forces, and the Serbs were overwhelmed.

In the end, the might of Serbia was broken forever, and the Tsar lay dead on the field of battle. But death had also come to Sultan Murad. A nobleman named Milos Obilic pretended to turn traitor to gain an audience with the sultan, then stabbed the sultan to death, sacrificing his own life in the process.

### **Remembered in Song and Story**

The Serbs are masters of oral poetry. Many believe their works rank alongside *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*, and even the *Iliad*. The masterpiece of the genre is *The Battle of the Field of the Blackbirds* (or *The Battle of Kosovo*). In this poem, Sultan Murad sends a message to the Tsar: “No two men can rule over the same land. If you value your life, you will submit.” As the Tsar was pondering his options, two gray falcons appeared, and they carried in their beaks what first seemed to be a little bird. But when it landed at the feet of the Tsar, it was Saint Elijah.

Elijah had brought word from the Virgin Mother in Jerusalem. The Tsar had a choice: “You can conquer the Turk and build an earthly kingdom, or you can attain a place in the heavenly kingdom.” He was told that if he built a great stone church, God would ensure he conquered the Turks, but he would not go to heaven. If he chose heaven over earth, he should build a church

made of silk—which he did. Like Jesus, the tsar is given a choice, and he chooses sacrifice over power.

The night before the battle, the tsar held a great feast at his castle. The flower of Serbian nobility surrounded him, and he was asked, “Who do you value most?” “I value you all of you, my men. But for high honor it is Vuk Brankovic. For bravery it is Milos Obilic.” Vuk Brankovic predicts that Milos will betray their cause, but the tsar says, “No, Vuk Brankovic. You will be our Judas.” Again, the tsar is presented as a Christlike figure.

Many other images in the poem reinforce the theme that this is not just a war between nations but a war between Islam and Christianity, and the tsar is presented as a saint. It is told that after the battle, his head is thrown into a spring and his body left in the field. Forty years later, some boys came upon the head and body, perfectly preserved, and when they took the head out of the spring, it was able to move toward the tsar’s body and reattach itself. The boys took the body to the church at Ravanica, where he had wished to be buried. The remains of Tsar Lazar do rest in that church, the holiest of shrine of the Serbian people.

### History Repeats Itself

Archduke Franz Ferdinand thought that the Battle of Kosovo was ancient history on that summer day that would prove his last. Many thought the same way at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Yugoslavian state began to crumble into separate nations. But the Serbs have never forgotten. In a horrible display of ethnic cleansing, the Serbs sought revenge on the Muslim population of Kosovo, sought to take back that land. NATO troops fought on the very field of Kosovo Polje to stop that genocide. So myth and history still shape current events on the field of the blackbirds. ■

### Names to Know

**Hrebeljanovic, Lazar** (1329–1389): Serbian prince (*knez*) who led his people against the Ottoman at the Battle of Kosovo. He is revered as a saint in the Serbian Orthodox church and, while he never used this title in life, is known as Tsar (“Caesar” or “Emperor”) Lazar in Serbian folklore. The actual tsar of the Serbians during the Ottoman and Hungarian expansions of

the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Stefan Uros V, was a weak and ineffectual leader; Lazar was a sort of first-among-equals of the Serbian nobility.

**Murad I** (c. 1326–1389): Ottoman sultan who greatly expanded the borders of the empire, particularly into modern-day Turkey and the Balkans. Pope Urban V called a crusade against him in 1365, but the Christian forces were unable to stop his progress into Europe. He is credited with creating the Janissary corps, an elite fighting unit consisting of men who were taken from Christian territories as young boys, converted to Islam, and raised in a strict environment to be perfect soldiers.

### Suggested Reading

*The Batttle of Kosovo.*

### Questions to Consider

1. The higher truth of Kosovo is the clash of values between Christianity and Islam. What are these values, and can they ever be resolved?
2. Why do you think the history of the Middle Ages still resonates with such force in the Balkans?

# Julius Caesar in History

## Lecture 27

**S**ome individuals do not need myth to transform them. Their individual achievements in the full light of history are themselves world-transforming. Julius Caesar was just such a figure. On March 15, 44 B.C.—the Ides of March—Julius Caesar was on his way to the Roman Senate, expecting to be made king of Rome. Some 500 years before, Lucius Junius Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic, made the Romans swear that they would never again have a king. But such are the achievements of Caesar, and such as the need of Rome, that only a king can bring peace and prosperity back to the world.

He had come a long way to reach this point. Born in 100 B.C. to a patrician family that claimed descent from Aeneas's son Julius, by the age of 40 he was still seen as nothing more than a two-bit politician. The Rome in which he grew up was far removed from those heroic days of old; Rome was no longer a city-state but a bona fide empire, the superpower of its day, yet the Roman Republic's noble constitution had been utterly corrupted by men of wealth.

### **The Republic in Caesar's Day**

Bitter partisan politics had brought the state to absolute gridlock. Budgets could not even be passed. The populares stood for aggressive foreign policy and entitlements to the Roman people—free food and free entertainment provided by gladiatorial games. The only way you got elected in the Roman system was by spending lots of money on your campaign, money raised through investment in international trade along the Silk Road. Such investments were risky; many an ordinary Roman citizen fell heavily into debt.

The Roman taxation system was totally corrupt. Roman citizens paid no taxes, but provincials paid at enormous rates. Taxes were collected by private companies that bid for the job in closed auctions. Any amount they collected over their bid was their profit. The government turned a blind eye to the way these companies collected the taxes. Provincials could lodge complaints of

extortion, but the juries were composed of senators who had a vested interest in keeping the tax money flowing. So to the provincials, the Roman Republic was an oppressive, brutal system.

The Roman Army had changed, too. The army that had conquered Hannibal was a citizen militia, but in 106 B.C., the Roman people had voted to abandon the draft in favor of a professional standing army. Modern military technology was too complicated, training too cumbersome, for an army of citizen soldiers. But thoughtful Romans felt that a people who no longer wanted to serve their country no longer valued their freedom. Meanwhile, the government seemed powerless to defend the people from the Iranian Empire to the east, pirates in the Mediterranean, and terrorists in their own midst.

### **Caesar's Rise to Power**

The leading politicians of the day were Marcus Licinius Crassus and Gnaeus Pompeius. Crassus was by far the wealthiest man in Rome, and he seemed to think that making a lot of money made him a good statesman. Gnaeus Pompeius was a capable general who had effectively destroyed the provincial terrorist network and brought about a foreign policy settlement in the Middle East. In 60 B.C., Crassus and Pompey—rivals, but knowing they had to work together—decided they needed a politician who would do anything for anybody, to get two bills past Marcus Porcius Cato and the Optimates—“the best men”—who stood for traditional Roman values of a modest foreign policy, fiscal responsibility, and no entitlements.

Crassus wanted a government bail-out for some of his friends who had made a bad bargain; Pompey wanted his settlement in the Middle East confirmed. They were not able to achieve this themselves, so they turned to Gaius Julius Caesar.

Caesar was well-educated, a wonderful orator (though nobody knew it yet), and a poet. He was completely inexperienced in military affairs, but he had a vision of a revitalized Roman Empire with himself as absolute ruler—an empire that would bring peace and prosperity to the provinces and would secure the borders through the conquest of the Gauls, the Germans, and the Iranians.

And Caesar had ambition. Once, when passing through a small, dirty village with some friends, the friends said, “Ew, how could anybody live in a place like this?” Caesar replied, “I would rather be the number one man in this dump than the number two man in all of the Roman Empire.” He was also once found weeping uncontrollably before a bust of Alexander. “Before he was 33, Alexander had conquered the world,” he said, “and I have done nothing. That driving ambition is what a hero must have.”

As a senator, Caesar proved to be a very smooth manipulator of the system, and when in 58 B.C. he was offered a position of governor, or proconsul, he chose to govern Gaul, the ancient enemy of Rome. At the time, only the very southern tip of what we now call France was Roman Gaul, but Caesar felt it was in the interest of the Roman people to subdue free Gaul. He had foresight; he saw the problem before it was a problem and moved to block it. This dovetailed with his personal ambition to develop a military reputation, a loyal army, and vast wealth, and then to seize power over the Roman Republic.

Over six long and bloody years, from 58 to 52 B.C., Caesar showed himself to be one of the greatest generals in history. His troops became utterly devoted to him. In 55 and in 54 B.C., having battered most of Gaul into submission, he crossed the English Channel and faced the British on the shoreline. Caesar remains to this day the only general in history to manage this feat. When the Gauls rose in revolt under their war chief Vercingetorix, Caesar brought them to bay with 50,000 men versus a Gallic force of over 300,000.



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**Julius Caesar rose to power through military prowess and ceaseless determination.**



Caesar was constantly scrutinized by his enemies in the Roman Senate, who sought for reasons to strip him of his command. They investigated him for war crimes in Germany, but Caesar enough wealth to buy heavy influence in the Senate.

### **From Leader to Ruler**

February 14, 49 B.C. was meant to be the last day of Caesar's command in Gaul and northern Italy. His enemies in the Senate had finally carried the vote, and he was expected to lay down his command as governor the next day, return to Rome as a private citizen, and be investigated for his alleged crimes. Instead, he crossed the Rubicon River with his army. He would then march on Rome, capture the city, defeat his enemy Pompey, and by 46 B.C.

become absolute master of the Roman world.

### **As a senator, Caesar proved to be a very smooth manipulator of the system.**

Caesar understood that the state of the economy is the most important thing to the people, so he set about restoring it. He cut taxes on the

provincials. He restored the credit of Rome by immediately paying the principal on the nation's debts, canceling the interest. He created millions of jobs through a massive program of public works. To the provinces, he held out the promise of Roman citizenship. He founded colonies to give land to his veterans and Roman citizens who wanted the dignity of work. He even solved the problem of the Roman calendar by switching from a lunar to a solar reckoning—the Julian system of 365 days and a leap day every fourth year.

He had accomplished so much, but he wanted one thing more. He wanted the title of king. On February 15, 44 B.C., he had been made dictator for life, but dictator was a Roman term. The provinces, particularly in Asia, would not respond to it.

We have seen how, in the hero myth, the hero's death is often due to the treachery of his closest friends. So it was with Caesar. Marcus Junius Brutus—descended from the man who had driven the kings from Rome—and Gaius Cassius Longinus began a conspiracy, eventually 63 men in

all, who believed that Caesar could not be turned from his ambition—an ambition they saw as a threat to the nation.

The conspiracy did not stay secret for long; all of Rome was filled with rumors, but to show his utter contempt, his complete lack of fear of death, Caesar dismissed his bodyguard and went alone to the Senate on March 15, 44 B.C. “I have lived long enough” he said, “in terms of the natural span of my life and the glory I have achieved.” ■

### Suggested Reading

Plutarch, “Julius Caesar,” in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*.

Suetonius, “Julius Caesar,” in *Lives of the Caesars*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Can you think of another historical figure like Caesar whose reputation was later enhanced by being assassinated?
2. Dante’s admiration of Caesar was so great that he put Brutus and Cassius in the same circle of hell as Judas. Do you share Dante’s sentiments? Why or why not?

# Napoleon and the Mantle of Caesar

## Lecture 28

**J**ulius Caesar did not need myths to transform him into a hero, although he accumulated myths throughout the Middle Ages. He was known as one of the Nine Worthies—that selection of great men from the Bible and from pre-Christian antiquity that nonetheless embodied the values of medieval Europe.

Many since have tried to wear the mantle of Caesar, to become the individual who brings the entire world together in one community, one polity, one economy. But none wore that mantle with more dignity and glory than Napoleon Bonaparte. Like most French schoolboys of his time, as well as British and German ones, Napoleon read Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars*, a masterpiece of Latin prose and a virtual textbook on how to be a successful general. Like Caesar, Napoleon grew up in revolutionary times.

### **Napoleon's Military Career**

The French Revolution broke out in 1789, and the young Napoleon was commissioned a second lieutenant in the artillery. He gained a reputation at the siege of Toulon and was catapulted even higher by his successful defeat of an antigovernment mob in 1795.

Next, he was commissioned to lead a French expedition to Egypt, in command of scholars and artists as well as soldiers. Academically, it was a great success, leading (among other discoveries) to the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics. But militarily, it was a failure. The British Navy defeated his fleet at the Battle of the Nile. He attempted to gain France some territory in the Middle East, but when bubonic plague struck his troops, Napoleon abandoned them and returned to Paris. It would not be the last time that Napoleon would desert his army.

### **Emperor Napoleon**

By 1802, having won a series of battles that still resound through military history, Napoleon had been chosen consul for life—very much

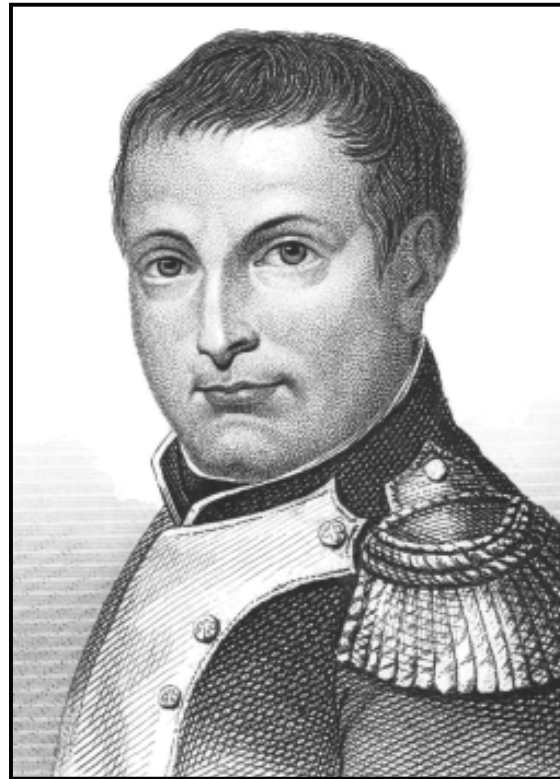
like Caesar was chosen dictator for life. But unlike Caesar, he had the backing of the French people when, in 1804, he crowned himself emperor of France. It was his view, as it had been Caesar's, that true liberty, true equality, and true fraternity came only under absolute rule. Democracy was a failed form of government, as the French Revolution had proved.

Napoleon believed that under his rule, not only the people of France, but all of Europe—maybe even the whole world—might come to enjoy the fruits of liberty. To Napoleon, liberty meant the freedom to live as you chose as long as you harmed no one else, relieved of the awesome burden of self-government. All citizens would be equal under the emperor, all equally protected under his laws. He drew upon the mission of Alexander the Great and dreamed of a brotherhood—a fraternity—of the entire human race under his rule.

Like Caesar, he set about to not only restore the greatness of France by military adventures but to revitalize the nation through the reorganization of the government. He thus produced the Code Napoleon, one of the greatest statements of civil rights ever produced, with a legacy that endures to this day in Europe and beyond.

### **Trouble in Imperial Paradise**

Napoleon was surprised when his vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity in a united Napoleonic Europe was rejected by nations like Spain, where the citizens groaned under a corrupt, church-dominated government. He was shocked when the Spaniards made an alliance against him with his old foe, the British. Napoleon derided the British as “a nation of shopkeepers,”



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**Napoleon envisaged himself as a new Caesar, but his character did not live up to his self-image.**

yet time and time again, on sea and land, the British defeated him in battle. Supposed nonentities like General Wellington had the strategic genius to keep Napoleon's forces tied down.

Napoleon would later write that the war in Spain was his greatest mistake, but elsewhere, things went magnificently. Victory followed upon victory against the Austro-Hungarians and the Russians. By 1809, Napoleon seemed master of Europe. He had created a continental trade system that forbade

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**Napoleon was surprised when his vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity in a united Napoleonic Europe was rejected.**

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all trade with Britain. But Tsar Alexander of Russia never accepted Napoleon as his superior; he, too, felt he was destined for greatness, and so in 1812, he broke the trade agreements and declared war on Napoleon's empire.

Two days later, Napoleon's troops began their march into the Russian Empire. The Grand Army was 600,000 strong, comprising not just Frenchmen but Germans, Belgians, and Poles. Russia's generals, although old, were quite capable, even wily. They understood their empire's greatest weapon was its size. Napoleon's army had to march across the seemingly endless steppes throughout the hot, dry, dusty summer, chasing a Russian army that refused to give battle.

On September 7, the Russians suddenly turned and faced Napoleon's forces just outside Moscow. In a savage, bloody battle, the Russians were driven from the field, but the losses that Napoleon incurred made his victory a Pyrrhic one—a tactical victory but a practical defeat. The army's supply lines were stretched impossibly thin, but Napoleon pressed on. Moscow lay close ahead, with provisions and shelter for the taking. No doubt, once he took Moscow, Alexander would be forced to surrender.

But when the Grand Army reached Moscow, they discovered a wasteland. Half the city was burned to the ground, provisions were scarce, and practically the whole population had fled. Farmland for miles and miles around was scorched and bare. Napoleon had a decision to make: try

to survive the winter in this desolation, or turn for home. The Grand Army withdrew.

Russia's other great weapon was its winters. The season came early that year, with heavy snows in October. The army marched and starved. Then the Cossacks began a series of hit-and-run attacks on Napoleon's flanks. His men could not survive much more of these conditions. So Napoleon, this emperor of France, this man who would wear the mantle of Caesar, abandoned his army for Paris once again, leaving the bodies of his loyal soldiers for the cold and the wolves. Less than 60,000 of his original 600,000 men ever made it home.

### **The Emperor's Fall**

Now the fury of Europe turned on Napoleon. He was defeated by a coalition of the British, Russians, and Prussians at the Battle of Leipsic in 1813, and he was forced to abdicate. He was placed in a generous confinement on the island of Elba, and for a time he seemed content, but in fact he dreamed of returning. He escaped Elba and for a glorious 100 days rallied France for one more mighty struggle. At the Battle of Waterloo, that British "mediocrity" the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon for the final time. This time, he was exiled to the isolated island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic, persecuted in petty ways by the British Governor Hudson Lowe until his death on May 5, 1821.

### **In the Footsteps of a Namesake**

Many years later, Napoleon's nephew, calling himself Napoleon III, would seek to restore his uncle's vision of a liberal autocracy to govern France and, eventually, the world. After the Revolution of 1848, which deposed the last of the Bourbon kings, Napoleon III gained control of the assembly and had himself named president of France, then emperor of France. This *petit* Napoleon also sought to wear the mantle of Caesar, and though he was even less successful than his uncle at this, he did write what is probably the best biography of Julius Caesar.

Napoleon III's empire was an empire of businessmen, where a few men made big money on international trade while a few sops were thrown to the poor in the form of entitlements. Prussia's Otto Von Bismarck still thought this

new Napoleon was as dangerous as the first, and thus he drew him into war. Within a matter of months, the new French Empire was broken. Napoleon III went to exile in England and served in the British army in the Zulu War. The mantle of Caesar once again proved too difficult to wear. ■

### Suggested Reading

Gundolf, *The Mantle of Caesar*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Theodore Roosevelt admired George Washington and Abraham Lincoln but had little use for Thomas Jefferson, while Winston Churchill surrounded himself with Napoleonic memorabilia. Do you think we can judge leaders by their favorite historical figures?
2. How did the vision of Napoleon compare with the European Union of today?

# Arminius and German Mythology

## Lecture 29

**F**our times in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, French and German armies clashed: Waterloo, Sedan, World War I, and World War II. Why did these two cultivated, well-educated, and prosperous European cultures come to war so often? To answer that question we need to return to Rome in A.D. 9.

Caesar Augustus, still *princeps* of the empire, had realized almost all of Julius Caesar's dreams. He had added more territory to the empire than any leader before (or any leader to come). He had chosen a slightly different path than his mentor and adoptive father, however. He made a treaty with Iran, rather than try to annex it. But, like Julius Caesar, he still worried about Germany.

### Rome Comes to Germany

Two decades before, Augustus had appointed his favorite adopted son, Nero Claudius Drusus (later called Germanicus) to lead several invasions across the Rhine River into German territory. But just as it seemed he would subdue the Germans, he was thrown from his horse and killed. For a time, Augustus was content with Germanicus's accomplishments, and Rome reached no further.

By A.D. 9, Augustus believed that the Germans had been sufficiently cowed that they would soon become Romanized and accept Roman rule—pay taxes, accept governors, accept Roman law, even speak Latin. A number of Germans had even enlisted in the Roman army; non-Romans who served for 25 years would receive Roman citizenship for themselves, their wives, and their children.

### Arminius, the German Roman

One such soldier was Arminius, a member of the Cherusci tribe. He had served with such distinction that, when he retired, he was granted not only Roman citizenship but the high rank of equestrian—just below senator. Theoretically, he was eligible to govern a province. But in his heart, Arminius



remained a German, and sometime around A.D. 8, he began to go from tribe to tribe preaching rebellion against Rome.

The Germans' one weakness was the disunity of their tribes. Each was fiercely independent of the others and had allowed different amounts of Romanization to creep into their lives, from the Ubii who were almost completely Romanized to the Marcomanni who rejected all Roman ways. Arminius went to each of them, dressed as a Roman but speaking in German, and asked them, "Are you willing to become slaves of the Romans?"

He insulted the Roman governor of Germany, Quinctilius Varus, as a man of poor judgement and said such an incompetent appointment was a deliberate insult from Rome. He would rip off his toga, revealing German war paint beneath, and called on the Germans to swear an oath to their ancient gods that they would rise up together against Varus.

Meanwhile, Arminius posed as Varus's friend and counselor. He told Varus that the time was ripe to subdue the Germans once and for all. Varus simply needed to orchestrate a show of strength: Bring three legions through the territory, and town after town, tribe after tribe would open its gates to them. Despite the warnings of other Germans in Varus's palace, Varus trusted Arminius.

### **The Battle of Teutoburg Forest**

Because Germany had not been Romanized, it lacked the kind of Roman roads the armies were used to. On top of this, the German summer was rainy and chilly, making the forest paths muddy. This was hard on the Roman Army, which did not travel lightly.

Despite the hard travel, the further the army went into German territory, the more it seemed their expedition would be successful. Each of the tribes submitted and asked that Roman soldiers be left behind—detachments of 300 or 400 men—to protect them from other German tribes who might be anti-Roman. So their numbers shrank as they went.

Then one day, Arminius was gone. He had told Varus that he was scouting ahead, spreading the news of the benefits of Roman civilization to the tribes

ahead. He would, he said, also bring back German troops to supplement their numbers. Varus failed to note that a considerable number of the Germanic warriors who accompanying him in the first place had gone.

The German attack, when it came, appeared out of nowhere. German warriors flowed out of the woods, outnumbering the Romans five or six to one and completely surrounding the straggling column. Rain was pouring down, making the leather halters the Romans used to launch their javelin's useless. Their formation was too loose to mount an effective locked-shield defense and fight with their short swords. They were weighed down in the mud with their heavy armor and equipment. The Germans—unarmored and

armed with long spears—had the advantage among the trees, rain, and mud.

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**Despite the warnings of other Germans in Varus's palace, Varus trusted Arminius.**

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Somehow, in the chaos, some of the Romans managed to build turf walls and fortify themselves inside a camp, but that left the rest of their

comrades at the mercy of the Germans. The Germans loved to torture their enemies; the braver you were the more they tortured you. Ultimately, the bravest would be offered as a bloody sacrifice to the fierce German gods.

The next morning, the sun rose on a scene of absolute horror, and the Romans realized their only hope was to fight their way back to the Rhine. For two days, it looked like they would make it, but Arminius was simply gathering more troops for another attack. On the fourth day, as the rain grew ever heavier, the Germans attacked one final time, overwhelming the Romans. Many soldiers, including Quinctilius Varus himself, committed suicide rather than fall into German hands.

In the end, more than 15,000 men were dead or captured. When he received the news of the battle, Augustus tore his toga in anguish. For the rest of his life, he would wear black robes on the anniversary of the battle. In his will, he included the command that his successors make no further effort to expand the empire northward. They must leave Germany alone.

## Remembrance and Reassessment

The Emperor Tiberius, Augustus's heir, did not quite accept Augustus's advice. He allowed his nephew, Germanicus Caesar (son of that first Germanicus) to once more lead men into Germany in A.D. 15. As before, the Germans withdrew, letting the legions get further and further into German territory. When they reached the Teutoburg Forest, they discovered that the bodies of their comrades had been left there, mangled and unburied, for six years. Germanicus and his men buried them with full military honors and erected a mound over them to honor their bravery.

Arminius eventually attacked Germanicus's army as he had Varus's, and the Romans had to fight their way to the safety of Cologne and the Rhine River. Germanicus tried again the next year; this time, he tried to outflank the Germans by taking most of his troops by boat, through the North Sea. Germanicus claimed a few great victories, but in the end had to retreat. Many men were lost in the brutal North Sea storms. At this final disaster, Tiberius removed Germanicus from command in Germany, gave him a triumph in Rome, and sent him off to the Middle East. Rome never again moved against the Germans.

**Tacitus**, the Roman historian of the late 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., admired the Germans and Arminius. His *Germania* contrasted the virtue, chastity, and warrior ethos of the Germans with the decadent Romans of his own day. He predicted that one day they would conquer the Roman Empire.

Arminius himself was murdered by treachery, accused of trying to make himself king over all the tribes. Still, he was the leader of the greatest enemy the Romans ever faced, the only enemy the Romans failed to defeat. ■

### Name to Know

**Tacitus** (a.k.a. **Publius Cornelius Tacitus**; A.D. 56–c. 120): Roman historian and public official. His first published works were the *Agricola*, a biography of his father-in-law, who had been a governor of Roman Britain, and the *Germania*, an account of the German peoples of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D. His driving passion in these and all his later works was to show the people of Rome how they had fallen from their virtuous past, usually by contrasting them with other times and other peoples.

## Suggested Reading

Tacitus, *On Britain and Germany*.

Turtledove, *Give Me Back My Legions*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Does the contrast that Tacitus drew between the vigorous Germans and the decadent Romans have any relevance for today?
2. Do the tactics of Arminius against the Romans have anything to teach modern generals and soldiers about fighting a guerrilla war?

# Teuton versus Roman

## Lecture 30

**T**acitus tells us that the Germanic bards told stories of Arminius, but unlike King Arthur, Arminius did not attract a whole set of legends, so he faded from the German imagination for many centuries. When the humanists began reading Tacitus with new intensity the late 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Germans found a new hero to bolster their national identity.

### Arminius and the Idea of Germany

In 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the doors of Wittenberg Church, some 365 political entities comprised the Holy Roman Empire—the German nation. Arminius, rechristened Hermann, soon became a source of the mythology supporting the German reformation against the corrupt church at Rome. But the person who truly made Arminius a German (specifically, Prussian) national hero was Napoleon. He became a model of resistance to the French onslaught. The poet Heinrich von Kleist wrote a play *Die Hermannsschlacht* in which Varus and the Romans are just pseudonyms for Napoleon and the French.

So in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Prussia reformed its government and army, but above all, it fostered an intellectual revival where philosophers stressed that German culture was unique and had preserved its uniqueness against the forces of Rome. So from being one of the most internationally minded peoples, the Germans became one of the most chauvinistic and nationalistic.

The cult of Arminius reached its peak in 1870–1871 when Germany was finally united under a single government. The government even erected an enormous statue to Arminius in Detmold, near the Teutoburg Forest. Arminius stands on a huge dome, carrying a seven-foot-long sword inscribed with the words *Deutsche Einigkeit, meine Stärke—meine Stärke, Deutschlands Macht*. “German unity is my strength, and my strength is German power,” the power of the sword.

## France versus Germany

The Romans made several attempts to regularize their frontier with the Germanic tribes. The Limes Germanicus—"the German line"—ran from the mouth of the Rhine and meandered south and west toward Regensburg. The line marked the limits of Roman power. Even today, a visitor will notice how different the world of France, south of the line, is from the world of Germany to the north. The Gauls were Romanized; the Germans were not.

The French took on the values and ideals of Roman civilization; the Germans retained a sense of their ancestors untarnished valor right down to the end of World War II. Under Adolf Hitler, this sense of German uniqueness took on the most grotesque and evil forms imaginable. His supermen were modeled on Arminius and his warriors.

## The Fall of Rome

Generations of German schoolchildren were taught that the Roman Empire fell because of the Germans. In a sense, that's correct. But how were they able to do this? Were they the sole cause, or was the situation more complex than that?

Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D. was the world's first superpower and arguably history's only true superpower—absolutely dominant militarily, politically, economically, and culturally. One language, one law, and one currency were accepted from the North Sea to the Sahara Desert. The travels of Saint Paul are the best tribute to Roman peace and justice. When he was arrested, and the officer threatened to beat him, Paul said, "You cannot beat me. I am a Roman citizen. I have the right to due process." Indeed, the global economy and global culture of the empire made the spread of Christianity possible.

Yet at that same time, thinkers like Tacitus were pondering whether or not their empire would last much longer. Some of them drew analogies to the human body that just wore out. Tacitus blamed decadence and corruption. In more recent generations, historians have pointed to the possibility that the Romans' lead plumbing may have poisoned the entire populous. Others have uncovered evidence of climactic change that altered food supplies, causing new economic tensions.

## **The Failings of Great Men**

All of these explanations ignore the simple truth that individual Roman leaders made individual—and, as it turned out—critical mistakes. This is why all empires fall. The Romans made two critical mistakes in particular, one in terms of foreign policy, the other in terms of the economy.

Caesar Augustus made the first of these mistakes by deciding not to expand the empire. His peace with the Iranians left their large, technically superb army between Rome and some major sources of natural resources, such as the wheat of Egypt. Secondly, as we have seen, Augustus urged that there be no further expansion against Germany. Tiberius ultimately agreed with him, and after A.D. 16 there was no serious attempt to conquer the Germans. So the Germans and the Iranians continued to push on the empire, and when Rome fell victim to civil war and political instability in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.,

both of these forces attacked the Roman Empire again and again.

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**Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D. was the world's first superpower and arguably history's only true superpower.**

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Rome recovered by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but in such a way that it had transformed all of what made it efficient. The middle class had been the very foundation of the Roman Empire—well-educated, proud of

their wealth, investing in the empire, investing in the free-market economy. Rome had social mobility, too; slaves were able to buy their freedom and become part of this vital economic class. But by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the tax burden on the middle class was so enormous that investment was impossible.

Meanwhile, the Roman bureaucracy which in the heyday of Caesar Augustus had been small and efficient, was now bloated with useless jobs—the main cause of the tax increases. The army, too, had to expand in the face of foreign dangers, becoming ever less efficient and more costly. All of this transformed the Roman Empire into a totalitarian despotism where instead of social mobility, everyone was tied to the jobs of their ancestors.

As long as the empire had continued to expand, it brought in large amounts of money. The last emperor to be truly expansionistic was Trajan (r. 98–

117). He pushed across the Danube into the land we know as Romania today and brought back enough gold, wealth, and slaves to stimulate the Roman economy through the reign of Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180). Without expansion, the empire ran into debt. When the Germans and Iranians attacked in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Romans did not have the money to pay for defense and chose the worst possible course of action: devaluing their currency. Thus inflation swept the Roman Empire, fixed incomes were wiped out, and one more enormous burden was laid at the feet of the middle class. The middle class perished, and as the middle class perished, so perished the Roman Empire.

### **The Lessons of Rome**

Like the Romans, the Western powers have so far failed to solve the problem of the Middle East and Central Europe. We tried, as the Romans did, shock and awe, followed by nation building; they finally resorted to annexation. The Romans were not welcomed as liberators; the people revolted, and ultimately the Middle East became a quagmire.



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**Augustus turned his back on the German problem, and the Germans eventually sacked the city of Rome—not once, but again and again in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.**



The Germanic situation is comparable our failure to bring Russia into the orbit of the free economic world. When communism collapsed, the Russians expected something like the Marshall Plan, to rebuild them economically as we had Germany after World War II, ensuring a sound basis for democracy. Instead, we left it with the worst aspects of capitalism. In the midst of all of this, the United States and many European nations have allowed their economies to become debt riddled, piling, unimaginable sums generation after generation.

All things human pass away, just as the Roman Empire passed away. But Rome left some enduring legacies, the most far-ranging of which is perhaps Christianity. But it also left us an example of glory. As Rome collapsed, the rulers of Constantinople took up the name of Caesar, and when that city finally fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, even the Muslim sultan, Muhammad the Conqueror, called himself the Caesar of Rome. The rulers of Russia styled themselves Caesars—Czars—as well. Charlemagne crowned himself not the Frankish Emperor but the Holy Roman Emperor, as would many European leaders who followed. Even the European Union looks back to the glory of a Europe united under Rome. ■

### Suggested Reading

Tacitus, *On Britain and Germany*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How would the history of modern Europe been different if the Romans had conquered and Romanized Germany as they did Spain and Gaul?
2. Can you think of examples besides Hitler's German nationalism where the mythology of history turns evil?

# Davy Crockett and the Myth of the Frontier

## Lecture 31

**T**he United States of America, like Rome, became a superpower, although now, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would no longer be fair to say it was as politically, militarily, economically, and culturally dominant as Rome in its heyday. And one day, like Rome, like all human endeavors, America as we know it will pass away. What will be America's legacy when that comes to pass?

Aside from its culture of rock music and fast food, America will leave behind a unique legacy of democratic freedom. It achieved a unique balance among national, political, and individual freedoms. These achievements were grounded in a belief in the Old Testament idea of a chosen nation, as well as the Greek and Roman models of constitutional democracy. The Christian tradition added the idea of an individual soul as unique and valuable in itself. From the English, America inherited the idea of a bill of guaranteed rights. What made America distinct from all its forebears, however, was its frontier. For the first time in centuries, a nation was able to develop a new heroic age.

### **The Myths of the Frontier**

The American frontier was a border without borders, an unlimited expanse, an unbounded opportunity. Democracy was fundamental to this frontier; everyone came there on equal footing, everyone had an equal chance of success or failure, and everyone who failed could start over again. America was a frontier from its very inception—an almost entirely unknown quantity to those Europeans who crossed the treacherous Atlantic Ocean to settle there.

The frontier was also about greed—the desire to use resources any way you want, to take away other people's property and freedom. For much of the frontier's history, the definition of "freedom" was simply freedom to live as you chose without regard to what happened to anyone else. With the arrival of the Puritans, however, freedom to worship became "freedom to worship as you choose as long as you choose to worship the way we do."

Yet the Puritan community in Massachusetts was still a frontier community. They cleared forests, hunted game, built towns and farms. In fact, all of the 13 British colonies began as frontiers. This was the fundamental truth King George III failed to understand. In 1763, he forbade his colonial subjects to cross the Appalachian Mountains, a decision that made perfect sense to a nobleman in Britain who was trying to ease relations with the French. But to the colonists themselves, it was a betrayal of the opportunities they'd fought for in the French and Indian War.

### **A Frontier Revolution**

George Washington was a man of the frontier. At the age of 14, he began learning the surveyor's trade. He ventured west, into what would become West Virginia and Pennsylvania. He served in the colonial militia, and throughout his life he believed in the unlimited expanse of freedom that was the frontier.

The frontier is where the decisive battles of the Revolutionary War were fought. By the summer of 1780, the British had failed to conquer New England; they had had mixed success in the mid-Atlantic. Thus they turned south. General Charles Cornwallis sent a flying column under Major Patrick Ferguson into the frontier colonies of North and South Carolina. Ferguson's mission was to force the frontiersmen to sign a declaration of allegiance to the British crown. If they did not, Ferguson would burn their settlements to the ground.

But the frontiersmen were not so easily cowed. The proclamation was read to them from the pulpits on a Sunday in September. It was discussed in the churchyards, and about 600 armed and mounted men (most of them from the area we now call Tennessee) soon headed for Morganton, North Carolina. Another 400 from the Virginia militia joined them along the way.

The two sides met at a place called King's Mountain on a bitterly cold October afternoon. It was Americans versus Americans—frontiersmen who fought in the Native American style versus New Jersey loyalists using formal European formations. But ultimately, the battle came down to Ferguson, who was bravely wearing a bright red shirt and riding in front of his troops, rallying them with his hunting horn. An hour into the fighting, he was shot from his horse. His army immediately surrendered.

## Andrew Jackson: Frontier President

This environment produced the most typical president of the frontier, **Andrew Jackson**. He was the last president we can number among the nation's founders. He served in the Continental Army as a messenger and was even taken prisoner for a time. In fact, his mother and brother died in

a British prisoner of war camp, instilling his lifelong hatred of the British.

## The frontier is where the decisive battles of the Revolutionary War were fought.

As a frontiersman, he Jackson also had an inveterate hatred of the natives. Jackson was a self-

taught and self-made man who made his reputation as a colonel in the Tennessee militia, leading them to victory against the Creek Indians at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. Davy Crockett, who marched with Jackson, noted Jackson's cruelty toward the native foe: "We shot them down like dogs." At the Battle of New Orleans, he proved himself to be one of America's greatest generals, defeating an army of British veterans and inflicting horrendous casualties on them.

When Jackson swept into the White House, he was the president of the frontier. He crushed the Bank of the United States, which he saw as an elitist attempt to control the frontiersmen. He was the champion of Indian removal, clearing land for the white settlers.

## Davy Crockett: The Most Famous Frontiersman

**Davy Crockett** was a protégé of Jackson's and a most remarkable individual. Born to a family of substance, he ran away at a young age and made his living at various jobs, but primarily as a hunter. His autobiography describes his marvelous exploits on these hunting expeditions swimming icy rivers, fighting off Indians, and so forth.

Crockett became popular in Tennessee and was elected to the United States Congress. Jackson expected Crockett to be a staunch ally, especially on anti-Indian legislation. But Crockett refused to support the removal act that violated the treaties from the Creek War. Crockett stood up for what was right, even though it cost him his office.

After he was voted out of congress, Crockett went to San Antonio, Texas, to a little mission called the Alamo. He would be joined by such frontier figures as Jim Bowie, William Barret Travis, and Sam Houston. Houston, like Crockett, was a Tennessee man, a protégé of Andrew Jackson, and a renowned hunter and fighter. He had served as governor of Tennessee and had lived among the Cherokee. All four men were part of the convention that proclaimed Texan independence from Mexico. All four men had a date with destiny at the Alamo. ■

### Names to Know

**Crockett, Davy** (1786–1836): Legendary American frontiersman. Although most famous for his hunting and exploring exploits and his death at the siege of the Alamo, Crockett was also a politician, serving in both the Tennessee legislature and the U.S. House of Representatives. His autobiography was a model that many frontier hero stories—fictional, nonfictional, and everywhere in between—would later emulate.

**Jackson, Andrew** (1767–1845): American soldier and seventh president of the United States. Lionized for his victory over the British at New Orleans in 1815, Jackson was denied the presidency through the “corrupt bargain” of 1824 but was elected in 1828 and 1832 and pursued aggressive policies against the Second Bank of the United States, the Cherokee Indians, and southern threats of nullification of federal legislation.

### Suggested Reading

Crockett, *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How would you define the term “frontier”?
2. Do you agree that the frontier was fundamental to shaping the American ideal of freedom?

# The Alamo

## Lecture 32

**T**he Texas War for Independence is worthy to take its place alongside the Trojan War in the annals of history. The heroes of the Alamo—Davy Crockett, William Travis, Jim Bowie, and the 181 men who fought alongside them—are fully worthy to be counted alongside Hector and Achilles, Patroclus and Ajax. Sam Houston, the founder of Texas's freedom, is worthy to stand alongside the greatest generals of antiquity.

### The Code of Honor

The values of the heroes of the Alamo and the War for Texas Independence were the values of the heroes of the Trojan War: honor, glory, freedom, and patriotism. "Honor" is a concept that has lost much of its meaning in our day. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century—and for millennia before—it was a complex nexus of beliefs based on a person's reputation for integrity, courage, generosity, honesty.

The code of honor can only exist in a society that duels—after all, the *Iliad* comes down to that climactic duel between Hector and Achilles. So, too, in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American frontier, the duel was a way of life.

### Toward Texan Independence

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico was a vast empire that had broken away from its motherland, Spain, by 1821. It stretched from the southern border of Mexico today, all the way north to encompass Texas, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Colorado and California. It was blessed with numerous natural resources. What it needed, particularly in Texas, was settlers.

In 1824, a liberal constitution was proclaimed creating a federal Mexico, and generous terms were offered to Americans—"Anglos"—who were willing to settle Texas. There were very few towns of any size, one of which was San Antonio. In between were large areas of beautiful land populated by fierce Comanche Indians. Mexico needed settlers to keep these natives at bay. Life on the frontier was cruel and unforgiving, but the settlers came.

Then, in the early 1830s, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna became ruler of Mexico. He was a follower of Napoleon and at first was a champion of liberty. After a time, however, he became convinced that his people wanted a despot. Thus he centralized the government and enacted harsh taxes. He insisted that all citizens become Catholics, including the mostly Protestant settlers of Texas.

Many of these settlers were sons of veterans of the American Revolution, and its lessons were fresh in their minds. Their response to this tyranny was the same as their forefathers' response: revolution against their legal government in the name of freedom.

### **From Revolt to Revolution**

In fact, revolts broke out all over Mexico, most of which Santa Anna put down by 1835. Texas, however, remained defiant. So on October 2, 1835, Santa Anna took a corps of about 100 well-trained troops, lancers, and cavalry into the small Anglo town of Gonzales and demanded that they turn over their cannon. The citizens fought off the troops.



**Santa Anna's *hybris* in thinking the Alamo would be an easy target was a vital part in the chain of events that led to Texas's independence.**

The citizens of Texas held a convention and began to discuss a declaration of independence and a constitution, but it soon became clear that they would first need an army. **Sam Houston** was appointed its general, and he had at his disposal countless brave, skilled, experienced frontiersmen. What frontiersmen were not, however, was disciplined. To create a force that could stand up to Santa Anna's well-trained army, Sam Houston needed time.

Houston therefore called on William Travis to buy him that time. He sent Travis to San Antonio and the crumbling mission known as the Alamo, commanding him to fortify and hold the position while Houston organized the rest of Texas's defense. When Travis arrived, barely 100 men held the mission-cum-fort.

A few more stragglers arrived over the next several days, including **James Bowie**, who argued with Travis over whether to hold their position or launch an immediate guerilla attack on Santa Anna's men. Around mid-February, Davy Crockett arrived with six comrades. Travis wanted to cede command to him, but Crockett refused. He simply asked that he and his men be assigned the most dangerous position, the ramparts, when the fighting began.

### **The Battle of the Alamo**

By February 23, the first 1,000 of Santa Anna's army had arrived. Some of his officers suggested not taking the Alamo, just going around it, but Santa Anna's pride was at stake. He would leave not an inch of Texas unconquered. He did send out a detachment to offer the Texans terms of surrender. Travis, however, replied by taking his cigar, lighting a cannon, and firing it at Santa Anna's position. Santa Anna then ran up the red flag—no quarter.

That whole long afternoon and night, the cannons of the Mexicans pounded the Alamo, while Travis returned fire and waited for promised reinforcements. He sent out a letter by messenger:

To the people of Texas and all Americans in the world ... I call on you in the name of liberty, of patriotism, and everything dear to the American character to come to our aid with all dispatch. ... I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a



soldier who never forgets what is due to his honor and that of his country. Victory or death. ... The Lord is on our side.

By March 5, Santa Anna was convinced that the fort would not fall by bombardment alone. His men would have to make one more effort to scale the walls. At sunrise the next morning, a brave contingent of Mexican soldiers rushed the Alamo. Colonel Travis was shot through the head. The Texans fired until their ammunition was gone, then fought hand to hand, using their Bowie knives or wielding their rifles like clubs. But by the afternoon of March 6, the last of the defenders was dead.

The stories disagree about what happened to Davy Crockett. Some say he surrendered and was executed by the Mexicans. Others, however, say he

was found dead, surrounded by the bodies of 17 Mexican soldiers he had taken down before he died.

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**The citizens of Texas held a convention and began to discuss a declaration of independence and a constitution, but it soon became clear that they would first need an army.**

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News of the Alamo's capture spread all over Texas, and the Texans began to flee their homes. Town after town was burned to the ground by Santa Anna. Houston's army went on the retreat, refusing to fight, despite the pleas of his brave frontiersman soldiers who

wanted to avenge the Alamo. Finally, near where Houston, Texas stands today, Houston's army came upon a river, the perfect spot Houston had been looking for to make his stand. He let word reach Santa Anna's camp that he would not attack before April 22 and then, on the April 21, he attacked, catching the Mexican Army entirely off guard. As the Texans rushed into battle, they cried, "Remember the Alamo!"

Santa Anna was captured and brought to Houston. Houston forced him to dictate a declaration recognizing Texan independence. And so, all along the roads of Texas, along those same lines of refugees that had carried the news of the massacre at the Alamo, now the good word was spread: Texas is free. ■

## Names to Know

**Bowie, James** (c. 1796–1836): Hero of the War for Texas Independence. Born in the United States, he spent his early adulthood as a slave trader and sugar grower in Louisiana before migrating to Texas, then a part of Mexico. Although initially friendly with important people in the Mexican government, he soon joined the revolutionary movement, where he distinguished himself as an able commander. He is best known, however, for his participation at the heroic stand at the Alamo and for the knife (perhaps invented by him) that bears his name.

**Houston, Sam** (1793–1863): First president of the Republic of Texas. As a youth, Houston spent three years living among the Cherokee and, although he helped the U.S. government relocate them to the Arkansas Territory, he also testified to U.S. Congress about abuses perpetrated against them by government agents. He first went to Texas to negotiate a treaty between the United States and Mexico in 1832, then settled there permanently a year later to help the movement for independence. Twice president of the republic, he helped ease the way for Texas to join the United States. Later, as governor of the state of Texas, he was deposed when he refused to support secession from the Union.

## Suggested Reading

Fehrenbach, *Lone Star*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What does the Alamo mean to you?
2. The War for Texas Independence and the Mexican War a decade later might be called the final acts in the founding of the United States. Why?

# Jesse James and the Myth of the Outlaw

## Lecture 33

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All across the world we find stories of outlaws who were once good and honest citizens but were driven to take up a life of crime by cruel and unjust rulers, who commit themselves to defending the weak against the strong. Robin Hood is the most famous example in the English-speaking world. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, bands of Greeks who acted in just this manner played a major role in the patriotic struggle against the Ottoman Turks.

Outlaws are prominent among American heroes as well, particularly heroes of the frontier, and particularly in the years after the Civil War. The war had produced a generation of well-trained, hardened killers and left a legacy of social resentment in its wake. Nowhere was this more true than in the border state of Missouri.

### **The James Boys**

Frank and Jesse James were born in the 1840s in one of the most aggressively secessionist parts of Missouri—the city of Liberty, near modern Kansas City. They came from a family of landholders and slave traders. Frank and Jesse joined bands of guerilla fighters attached to the Confederate Army. There Frank met Cole Younger and two of his brothers. The irregulars took part in some of the bloodiest fighting of the entire war, such as the so-called Sack of Lawrence, Kansas, which sent waves of terror all over the country.

After the war, Frank and Jesse made their way back to Missouri and tried to become good, upright citizens. Jesse became a newspaper editor and wrote story after story making heroes out of himself and his brother, describing how that they had been forced into a life of crime after the Civil War because of unjust treatment. Confederates were supposed to sign a sort of declaration of allegiance to the Union, but Jesse and Frank felt they had done nothing wrong. They did not need or want a pardon, and when they refused to sign, they were assaulted by Union authorities.

Meanwhile, all around Missouri, poor farmers were suffering from an unjust taxation system that, at least in the minds of Confederate Missourians, had

been put in place to tax them out of their farms. So unable to endure this tyranny anymore, Frank, Jesse, the Younger brothers, and other former raiders formed a gang and began to rob banks. Later they became more daring and began robbing trains. Jesse would later claim that he brought the

**There was no social safety net in those days, no second chance. Ruined was ruined.**

art of bank robbing to a new height and claimed credit for inventing the idea of train robbery.

The stories would circulate about how the gang would give the stolen money to this farmer or that

farmer they knew to be in need. People said that local families would hide the James brothers in plain sight, feeding and sheltering them as honored guests. The newspapers claimed that no lawman could ever take Jesse James alive. So their fame grew, and the banks and railroads got more and more desperate, and the stories took on mythic proportions, a struggle on behalf of the poor and oppressed farmers of the Midwest.

### **The James Gang versus the Pinkertons**

The railroads of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were monopolies. They could and did fix prices for shipping, which affected both the cost of moving produce and livestock and the cost of these goods at market. Shipping prices almost always left Midwestern farmers with little or no profit. The banking houses supported the railroad owners' price-fixing practices by keeping money so tight that an ordinary farmer could barely get a loan. If he had two years of bad crops, he lost his farm. There was no social safety net in those days, no second chance. Ruined was ruined.

To strike back against the James gang, the bankers and railroads hired the Pinkertons, one of the first private detective services in the United States. The Pinkerton men were chosen from veterans of the Civil War, hard men, crack shots, superb riders and trackers who were *carte blanche* to bring the James boys in.

According to the stories told in the newspapers, the James boys just wanted to go back to their family lives. But the Pinkertons gave no quarter; even while pretending to negotiate amnesty for the James boys, they bombed the

home of their mother, blowing off their mother's arm and killing one of their young cousins. Determined to avenge this, Jesse planned a raid on Northfield, Minnesota, which he considered a modern Sodom and Gomorrah.

### **The Robbery That Went Wrong**

The gang arrived in Northfield in September 1876, posing as cattlemen. One of the reasons they chose their particular target was that this bank was part owned by Albert Ames, who had been the military governor of Mississippi after the Civil War. He had imposed brutal martial law on Mississippi's people after the war and aroused deep hatred all over the former Confederacy. The bank's other owner was former general Benjamin Butler—known as Butler the Beast, the most hated Yankee except for William Tecumseh Sherman.

Ames was in Northfield that day, and the James gang encountered him as they were entering town. For some reason, Frank James tipped his hat to Ames and said, "Good morning, governor." Both the title and the speaker's Southern drawl struck Ames as suspicious.

Still, the bank robbery proceeded almost as planned, until the teller in charge, a man named Joseph Haywood, informed them that he could not open the main vault; it was on a time lock. As it happened, Haywood was lying, but he withstood their threats so bravely that they believed him and turned to go. Then Haywood made a mistake, shouting, "You rebel trash!" at their departing backs. Jesse returned and blew his brains out.

Haywood had caused enough delay, however, that the townsfolk had noticed the strange goings-on at the bank. The town's Union veterans scrambled for their guns. They shot down two of the gang members and badly wounded three. All but Jesse and Frank were captured over the next few days by a posse of ordinary Minnesota citizens.

### **Death from Within**

Jesse reformed the gang, including two of his cousins, the Ford boys. He continued to try to negotiate his own pardon, to no avail. He built a home for his wife, Zerelda, and their two children in St. Joseph, Missouri, and started a new life there under an alias. But he was killed in his own home by one of his Ford cousins on a Sunday afternoon in April 1882. ■

## Suggested Reading

Stiles, *Jesse James*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why did the myths of bandits like Bonnie and Clyde reemerge during the depression and the late 1960s?
2. Do you see anything romantic in outlaws like Robin Hood and Jesse James?

# General Custer—Hero or Villain?

## Lecture 34

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The Indian fighter is another fundamental figure in the mythology of the American frontier. The Indian wars received major mythological treatment from the early days of the frontier and continue to receive such treatment from Hollywood today. It is a tragic story, with many famous heroes and villains on both sides of the native/frontiersman divide, but none so famous as George Armstrong Custer.

### **Custer in the Civil War**

Custer may well be the most controversial figure ever to serve in the United States Army. Born to moderately well-off parents, he was raised partly in Ohio, partly in Michigan, which in the 1840s was still practically the frontier. His first career was in teaching. Perhaps he read such classic works as Caesar's commentaries on warfare during this time, but he certainly developed an interest in being a soldier and in 1858 was admitted to the United States Military Academy at West Point.

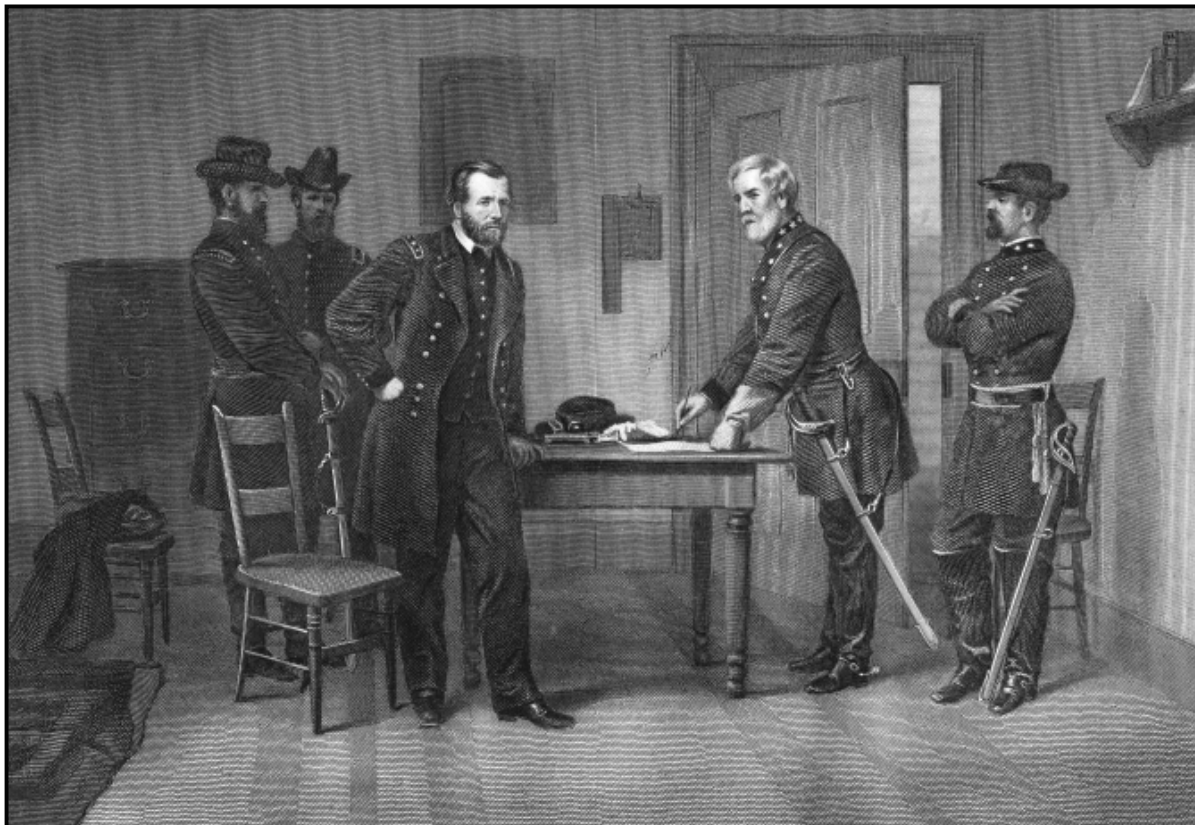
At the outbreak of the Civil War, Custer's West Point class was rushed to graduate, and he was commissioned in 1861. He soon gained a reputation for bravery and quickly given command of the First Michigan Cavalry. Because of his gallantry in action, he was promoted from captain to general at the remarkable age of 23.

At the Battle of Gettysburg, Custer may have performed his greatest single service to his country. General Robert E. Lee's plan on the third day of the battle was to carry out a complete encirclement of the Union Army. Custer's single regiment, although heavily outnumbered, forced General J. E. B. Stuart's veteran Confederate cavalry to retreat, preventing them from getting behind the Union troops. Such feats made Custer ever more famous, both in the U.S. Army and in the press. Then, in 1864, Custer achieved undying fame by razing the Shenandoah Valley with Sheridan and blocking Lee's troops at Appomattox Creek, where Lee and the Confederates finally surrendered.

## After the War

Wartime ranks were temporary, and Custer was disappointed to be reduced back to captain in the regular army. He considered life as a civilian businessman, and he considered fighting in the army of Benito Juarez against the French occupation of Mexico. Then President Andrew Johnson, knowing Custer's popularity, asked Custer to join him on a tour through the Midwest. Like Johnson (and like Lincoln before him), Custer believed the South should be treated with moderation, that the scars of the war should be healed as quickly as possible. Johnson hoped that Custer's reputation would help promote this idea among angry Northern Republicans.

After the tour, he took command of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry at Fort Riley, Kansas, and was returned to the rank of general. Life was hard out on the frontier. The Indian Wars were growing ever more brutal. The U.S. government's policies that forced natives onto reservations were verging on genocidal, particularly after the election of Ulysses S. Grant. As the Homestead Act, which went into effect in 1863, pushed white settlement



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**General Custer was present at many of the most important events of the American Civil War, including Lee's surrender at Appomattox.**



further and further west, the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Comanche pushed back, attacking outlying settlements and farms. In response, the government adopted the same policy of total war they had used against the South in the Civil War—killing, burning, and pillaging Indian villages indiscriminately, with the specific goal of breaking the civilian will to fight.

Custer, in the early fall of 1868, was sent to Fort Supply in what is now Oklahoma. It was to be Sheridan's supply base for a winter campaign against the Cheyenne and Arapaho. Custer's autobiography, *My Life on the Plains*, reveals his conflicted feelings toward the Native Americans at that time. On the one hand, his mission was to fight them and give no quarter. On the other, he admired their courage and relentlessness. Yet he also comes to recognize the brutality of his enemies' tactics, describing the torture and mutilation they inflict on their American captives.

On November 17, 1868, in the midst of a swirling snowstorm, Custer's men, led by a group of Osage Indian scouts, rode into a large village of Cheyenne and Arapaho, killing indiscriminately. Accounts vary—the mythology of the numbers of warfare is a subject in its own right—but Custer claimed 103 warriors were killed, while native oral tradition said no more than 11. Custer said he lost 13 men; native oral tradition puts it higher. All agree that Custer killed most of the natives' horses, sparing only those he needed to carry his prisoners back to the fort. This brutal conflict is now known as the Massacre at the Ouachita.

Custer soon made a foray into politics, but he quickly made an enemy of President Grant by speaking out against the secretary of war—Grant's brother-in-law—who was accused of embezzling funds meant to supply food to the Indian reservations. Custer and the Seventh Cavalry were shipped out to Fort Lincoln in the Dakota Territory.

### **The Battle of Little Bighorn**

Gold had been discovered in the Black Hills of the Dakotas, which were sacred ground to the Sioux Indians. It was where they buried their dead. The Sioux tried to explain the importance of this land to the white settlers, but the settlers had gold fever, and there was no cure. Although their government

had promised to protect the Black Hills in their treaty with the Sioux, Custer was ordered to protect the miners instead.

The tribes, sometimes at odds with each other, now realized they needed united resistance. Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Sioux came together under Sitting Bull. He was not so much a war chief as a religious leader. He proclaimed that he had a vision of long knives falling out of the sky and the U.S. soldiers dying like grasshoppers. So approximately 2,000 Indian warriors gathered and armed themselves with repeating rifles. Custer set out force them back to their reservations.

On June 25, 1876, Custer led his forces, along with a detachment of Crow Indian scouts, into the Sioux village of Little Bighorn, replicating the tactics he had used at Ouachita. Outnumbered and outarmed, Custer's men were quickly surrounded. His reinforcements could not reach him. Custer's men withstood this Indian assault from all sides for two full days. Not one of them survived. When Custer was killed toward the end of the second day, many native warriors rode by his body, touching it with their coup sticks, seeking some of the magic of the man they called Yellow Hair. ■

### Suggested Reading

Custer, *My Life on the Plains*.

Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of General Custer?
2. How would the United States be different if the American government had scrupulously abided by all its treaties with the Native American tribes?

# Reagan, Hollywood, and American Ideals

## Lecture 35

**A**rt and literature have always been the way by which the higher truths of mythology have been conveyed, from the oral poetry of Gilgamesh and Homer to the dime novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Hollywood films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The most successful of America's self-promoting, frontiersmen heroes was Buffalo Bill Cody. He grew up in Iowa, joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Volunteer Cavalry during the Civil War, and after the war gained his name by the joining in the slaughter of the buffalos, part of U.S. government policy that both fed the workers building the railroads and starved the Indians out of their lands. Later, Buffalo Bill created his Wild West Show, one of America's prototypical traveling circuses.

### **The Hollywood Myth Machine**

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawned, the frontier myth became the staple of Hollywood film. Cowboy-and-Indian films became the favorite form of conveying the myths of America, the myths of the frontier, and the myths that all Americans held dear. The Walt Disney Corporation even resurrected Davy Crockett from relative obscurity, and in 1955 coonskin caps became all the rage with America's children. Two years later, John Wayne portrayed Crockett in *The Alamo*, giving a moving speech about how the word "republic" gives him a lump in his throat. General Custer's image will be forever shaped by Errol Flynn in *They Died with Their Boots On*.

Throughout Hollywood's golden age—the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s—American cinema hammered home the message that America is the land of freedom. Sure, its government might fall to corruption from time to time, but an ordinary someone like Mr. Deeds could fix it right up. Americans did not go looking for fights, but when they found one, they finished it.

In *The Santa Fe Trail*, a young actor named Ronald Reagan got to put his mark on the myth of Custer. In his later political career, Reagan would come to champion those same Hollywood values as the values of good,

ordinary Americans. They were the values he had grown up with, believed in, portrayed in his films, and conveyed to the American people during one of the most difficult times in the nation's history.

### **The United States after Camelot**

In 1960, John F. Kennedy gave one of the most moving inaugural addresses in American history: "Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation. ... We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to ensure the survival and the success of liberty."

**No one at the time could have predicted just how much he would change the face of the American presidency.**

Then this young, handsome, inspiring president was shot down less than three years later, and a national nightmare began.

His successor, Lyndon Johnson, believed deeply in the New Deal and set out to conquer poverty but was impeded the Vietnam War.

Increasingly, the American people refused to pay that price for a war he could not explain to them. By 1968, cities were in flames and radical student groups were taking over college campuses. And just when it seemed that Johnson would bow out and President Kennedy's younger brother Robert would be in a position to unite the warring factions within the United States, Robert Kennedy, too, was shot down in the prime of his life.

When Richard Nixon was elected president it looked as though he could restore peace and order to America. He enacted bold foreign policy initiatives—recognizing China, negotiating with the Soviet Union, promising to end the war in Vietnam—but in fact he escalated the war, sent American soldiers to kill American students on American college campuses, and finally resigned in shame in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

Nixon was followed by Gerald Ford, whose greatest sin was perhaps being disliked by the press. He was unable to win a second term. His successor, Jimmy Carter, presided over a catastrophic economic collapse. Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam seemed the living embodiment of the domino theory

and America's worst fears about communism. Perhaps worst of all, 52 Americans were taken hostage at the American embassy in Iran, and Carter seemed powerless to save them.

Then, in 1980, when America's confidence in itself and its leaders was at perhaps its lowest-ever ebb, Ronald Reagan was elected president. No one at the time could have predicted just how much he would change the face of the American presidency.

### **A True Hollywood Hero**

Reagan was born and raised in Illinois. An athletic young man, he worked as a lifeguard in high school and played football in college. He graduated from Eureka College in 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression, and struggled to find work. Finally, the University of Iowa hired him to announce their football games on radio. Shortly thereafter, he became a sports broadcaster for a Des Moines radio station.

But Reagan had ambitions—namely, Hollywood ambitions. He convinced his boss to let him cover the baseball spring training season in Los Angeles and, while he was there, made a screen test for Warner Brothers. He was hired on the spot and, appropriately enough, cast in his first film as a newscaster.

During World War II, Reagan served his country by making propaganda films for the army. In the late 1940s, he became president of the Screen Actors Guild, and some of his first dealings in national politics involved testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee. It was during this time that he met and married his second wife, Nancy (Davis) Reagan, with whom he spent the rest of his life.

In the 1950s, he worked for General Electric, not only as the host of their television show *General Electric Theater* but as a nationwide spokesperson. Here he developed a taste and talent for public speaking, not just in front of businessmen but in front of ordinary Americans. He also got to know the American people on his travels and became convinced that they were a self-reliant people that neither wanted nor needed big government. He ran for and won the office of governor of California in 1966. In 1980, on his third try, he was elected president of the United States.

## Reagan as President

In his inaugural address, Reagan told the American people “Government is not the solution. Government is the problem.” Inheriting an economy with double-digit inflation, he instituted a policy of massive tax cuts, an overall increase in government spending, and running large budget deficits that did in fact bring inflation down. He was a master with the press, who liked the man even when they did not like his policies. He was also a master with the American people because he spoke about their values and views—a healthy economy, a small government, and America being a beacon of freedom for the world.

On the foreign policy front, Reagan stood in staunch opposition to communism. He was not afraid to call the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” nor to address Premier Mikhail Gorbachev directly, standing before the Berlin Wall and commanding him to “tear this wall down.”

When Reagan stepped down after his second term in 1988, America was proud again. Even Reagan’s harshest critics admit that he restored the confidence of the American people and, more than that, restored their belief in the presidency of the United States. ■

### Suggested Reading

D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan*.

Reagan, *An American Life*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Take one current film of imaginative fiction and discuss the values it conveys.
2. Do you believe that Reagan the president was shaped by the characters he portrayed as an actor?

# Mythology as a Path to Wisdom

## Lecture 36

**S**olon, who was archon of Athens in 594 B.C., exemplified the Greek ideal of nothing in excess. When on the verge of Civil War, Athenians asked Solon to bring them peace and order as a dictator. He did not. Instead, he created a balanced constitution and left them to travel. His favorite saying was, “Every day grow older, and every day learn something new.” The chief reward of a long life is to keep learning and changing your mind.

### **The Three Stages of Learning**

The three stages of learning are information, knowledge, and wisdom. Information is all about acquiring facts—frequently the so-called facts. Information is what we find on the internet, what pours out of the television, Twitter, and Facebook. It’s in many ways not much more than the gossip of a marketplace in ancient Athens or Rome, although these days the volume can be overwhelming.

The next step is to take these facts and weave them into a coherent whole. That was the objective of this course, to take facts and create a broader interpretation from them. That’s knowledge. But the final step—and it’s the step we don’t always take—is to apply knowledge to how we live our lives. That’s wisdom.

### **Just the Facts**

The facts we have learned from this course include how to define a myth and that a myth does not necessarily mean a falsehood. Myths often have historical kernels. We have learned that myths are a means by which societies in all places and in all times have conveyed higher truths. They are a means by which societies express their hopes, values, and disappointments. Each age may change a myth as a society grows and develops. Thus we learned that the mythopoetic imagination, the ability of humans to create myths, is universal.

We have also learned that myths and history are not always easy to distinguish from one another. Events that occur in the full light of history can quickly become disputed and take on the attributes of a myth. For example, whether or not George Washington prayed at Valley Forge rests entirely on secondhand evidence, yet the story certainly expresses the deeper truth that George Washington's belief that God stood behind the cause of the American Revolution.

Truth matters—facts matter—but we must distinguish between searching for the truth and debunking. Debunking is an ignoble profession; attempting to find the truth behind a myth can lead us to great and glorious knowledge and even to wisdom.

### **Great Myths, Great Books, Great Films**

Frequently, great myths become the subject of great books. Like a great book, a great myth has a great theme. It will be written, told, or sung in language that elevates the spirit. It will speak across the ages. Even in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the modern myth factory of Hollywood continues to make films about Troy and Beowulf, Alexander and Arthur. And these myths, directly and indirectly inspire new ones, like *The Lord of the Rings*.

### **The Double-Edged Sword**

The myths attached to great historical figures change frequently as society changes. In the 1950s, films about George Armstrong Custer focused on his heroism in the Civil War; after the Vietnam War, they began to focus on his less heroic deeds, turning him into a villain. Some myths do not convey higher truths but higher lies. The story of the Battle of Kosovo, in itself, is a noble story of the Serbian struggle to hold back the invading Ottoman Turks, but in 1990, some Serbians used that story to justify acts of genocide against Kosovo's Muslims.

### **Many Myths, One Truth**

From the many stories and facts we have learned, we can synthesize bits of knowledge. One message we have heard over and over, from many societies in many times, is the inevitability of death. The *Iliad* and the *Beowulf* tell us that ultimately we must die. Like Gilgamesh, we can go in search of eternal



life, but we will fail. Death will be our end, and what matters is the legacy that we leave behind.

### **One Myth, Many Truths**

A single myth can also offer more than one piece of knowledge. To Winston Churchill, the myth of King Arthur portrayed the ideal of a leader who in Britain's darkest hours stood forth against a barbarous foe. To historians, it conveys the highest values of the ruling classes of the Middle Ages—chivalry and courtly love. Through the story of the search for the Holy Grail, it spoke to medieval Christians of the deepest mystery of Christianity, the true presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Mass. To all Christians,

it speaks of the reality of human suffering, just as Christ—God made flesh—had to suffer.

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**From the many stories and facts we have learned, we can synthesize bits of knowledge.**

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America's myths, particularly its frontier myths, reveal values that still pervade the nation's self-

image today. Americans consider themselves uniquely self-reliant. They see themselves as a people chosen to bring liberty to the world. They believe they never seek war but fight injustice wherever it comes to light and, because God is on their side, are invincible. These are the themes of the myths of heroes from the founding fathers to Davy Crockett, myths made more powerful by the film and television industry.

### **Universal Truths**

We think about scientific fact as universal, but what we know about science is changing all the time. What you learned today as a fact may be disproven tomorrow. But when we talk about the universal truths and values conveyed by myths, we're talking about a set of values common in all places and in all times based on the idea of absolute right and absolute wrong.

When people talk about values being taught in schools, the next question is often, Whose values? I would suggest you could bring together a group of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists and discover a fundamental set of values they could all agree on. These are the values we've been discussing in our myths: the search for truth and the triumph of good

over evil. Most if not all of them discuss the human relationship with the divine as well.

### Lessons for Life

You have gained a great deal of knowledge, but how do you apply it to your own life? Let's take the lessons one at a time.

- We have learned that mythological heroes usually have a miraculous birth. Unlike our ancestors, we have the science to explain the miracle of birth, but that doesn't make it any less beautiful. So remember that every birth could be the birth of a hero.
- Every one of us ultimately goes on a quest, and it is never too late to begin. Sometimes we find our destiny on the road we took to avoid it. Remember, too, that every hero's life ends in death. Don't worry about living forever. Worry about what you leave behind.
- On the question of fate versus free will, we are no wiser than the Athenians of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Science still debates whether we are more a product of nature or nurture. Perhaps we are all fated by our genes to go on a certain quest. But we are almost certainly free to choose how we pursue our destiny. ■

### Suggested Reading

Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, p. 1–31.

### Questions to Consider

1. As you end this course, how do you define “mythology”?
2. Do you think the age of mythology has come to an end?

## Biographical Notes

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**Aeschylus** (525–456 B.C.): Along with Euripides and Sophocles, Aeschylus was one of the three great Athenian tragedians. As a youth, he fought at the Battle of Marathon. His play *The Persians* was produced in 472 B.C. and is probably our earliest extant Greek drama. It is also the only extant drama to be set in the poet's own day rather than in the mythological past. His *Oresteia*, dealing with the murder of Agamemnon and its consequences, is our only extant trilogy from Athenian drama. The tragedies of Aeschylus reflected his deep concern with liberty, law, and justice.

**Akhenaten** (a.k.a. **Amenhotep IV**; r. 1353–1336 B.C.): Pharaoh of Egypt's 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty who established, for the first and only time in its ancient history, monotheism as the official religion of Egypt. He dismantled the traditional Egyptian priesthood, established a new imperial capital at Akhetaton (modern Tell el-Amarna), and led the development of a new artistic and architectural style in service of his religion. His cult, worship of the sun's disk under the name Aten, did not long survive his death. However, his idea of a single god who was loving, benevolent, and perfect may have influenced—or at least mingled with—the ancient Hebrews' ideas about Yahweh.

**Aristotle** (386–322 B.C.): Greek philosopher. Although not an Athenian by birth, Aristotle spent much of his life teaching in Athens. He was the pupil of Plato and founded his own university in Athens, the Lyceum. Aristotle was perhaps the most profound mind Greece ever produced. He was the tutor of Alexander the Great and in later centuries became the most influential intellectual figure in both the European and the Islamic Middle Ages. His *Poetics* is the first book on literary criticism to come down to us from classical antiquity. It provides us with a working definition of a great book as one that has a beneficent moral impact on its audience.

**Arrian** (a.k.a. **Lucius Flavius Arrianus**; c. A.D. 86–146): Historian, Roman politician, and friend to Emperor Hadrian. His *Anabasis* is a Greek-language work that describes the Asian expedition of Alexander the Great. Arrian based his work on accounts from Alexander's half-brother, the pharaoh

Ptolemy; the engineer Aristobulus; and other eye-witnesses. His focus is on Alexander's military tactics and prowess, rather than Alexander the person.

**Augustus** (a.k.a. **Gaius Octavius**; 63 B.C.–A.D. 14): Rome's first emperor (*princeps*) and adopted son of Julius Caesar. He was arguably the greatest statesman in Western history. He created political structures that would bring two centuries of unprecedented peace and prosperity to the Roman world (the Pax Romana) and revitalized Roman patriotism after the ravages of civil war. Augustus took as his model Aristotle's concept of the god tyrant as described in *Politics*, sacrificing everything for personal power and aggrandizement, yet somehow this personal quest for glory saved his nation.

**Bowie, James** (c. 1796–1836): Hero of the War for Texas Independence. Born in the United States, he spent his early adulthood as a slave trader and sugar grower in Louisiana before migrating to Texas, then a part of Mexico. Although initially friendly with important people in the Mexican government, he soon joined the revolutionary movement, where he distinguished himself as an able commander. He is best known, however, for his participation at the heroic stand at the Alamo and for the knife (perhaps invented by him) that bears his name.

**Callisthenes** (a.k.a. **Callisthenes of Olynthus** c. 360–c. 327 B.C.): Greek historian and great-nephew of Aristotle who accompanied Alexander the Great as the official historian of Alexander's Asian expedition. Notorious for his self-importance, Callisthenes clashed with Alexander over the issue of *proskynesis*—Alexander's demand that the Greeks prostrate themselves to him as to a god. This rift and other clashes led Alexander to arrest Callisthenes, who eventually died in prison. Callisthenes penned several works on Greek history and an extremely important account of Alexander's expedition. The more sensational anecdotes from Callisthenes's work were incorporated into the Alexander romance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., whose unknown author is thus called Pseudo-Callisthenes.

**Chrétien de Troyes** (fl. A.D. 1165–1180): French poet of chivalric romance. Chrétien was a court chaplain attached to the court of Champagne. He wrote some of the most famous medieval chivalric romances, particularly *Lancelot*, or *The Knight of the Cart*. Chrétien's work explores the relationship between

the knight's devotion to his military duty and his love of the unattainable lady—the ways in which these two passions both interfere with and reinforce one another. Chrétien's take on the Lancelot character—complex, conflicted, at times almost absurd—is arguably the reason this figure continues to capture our imaginations today.

**Crockett, Davy** (1786–1836): Legendary American frontiersman. Although most famous for his hunting and exploring exploits and his death at the siege of the Alamo, Crockett was also a politician, serving in both the Tennessee legislature and the U.S. House of Representatives. His autobiography was a model that many frontier hero stories—fictional, nonfictional, and everywhere in between—would later emulate.

**Dante** (a.k.a. **Dante Alighieri**; 1265–1231): Florentine poet and author of the *Divine Comedy*, a monumental epic poem in 100 cantos sketched against the background of the universe. Born to a family of modest means, he served his city in minor public offices but suffered exile in the political upheavals of 1301–1302. He gained literary fame from his *Vita nuova* and scholarly attention for his *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*. The death of the lovely Beatrice—Dante's unrequited love and a central figure in the *Divine Comedy*—in 1290 evoked the major changes in his thought and writing.

**David** (d. c. 962 B.C.): The second king of ancient Israel and the first to unite all the Hebrew tribes into a single kingdom. He conquered the Philistines and established Jerusalem as the kingdom's capital, thus defining Israel as a nation. His great success as a warrior and struggles with personal ethics mark him as an archetypal hero figure who rises to the height of power but is destroyed by his own *hybris*. But in both historical and mythological terms, he is also the archetype of the messiah, the anointed king of God's chosen people, a concept that would have resonance throughout the history of the Jewish people and, after the fall of Rome, all of Europe.

**Dionysius of Halicarnassus** (fl. 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.): Greek-born historian of the Roman Republic. His *Roman Antiquities*, like the later work of Plutarch, was intended in part to persuade the conquered Greeks that their Roman overlords were worthy rulers of a civilization whose greatness rivaled their own. He was also an accomplished rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric whose

theory of rhetoric, *imitatio* (imitation of great authors), eclipsed Aristotle's *mimesis* (imitation of nature) as the dominant style of Latin writers.

**Evans, Arthur** (1851–1941): British archaeologist most notable for his discovery of the Minoan civilization. Evans was born into a family of well-educated, successful businessmen, and his father, John, was a strong supporter of his work. Educated at Oxford and Göttingen, his career was arguably more shaped by his adventurous travels, particularly in the Ottoman-occupied Balkans. He began his self-funded excavations at Knossos in 1900 and was knighted for his discoveries in 1911.

**Geoffrey of Monmouth** (1100–1155): Bishop and historian whose *History of the Kings of Britain* (*Historia Regum Britanniae*) introduced King Arthur to English literature. The byname “of Monmouth” indicates that he was born near the English-Welsh border. In his youth, he was a cleric at Oxford University, but later in life he was appointed bishop of the diocese of St. Asaph in northern Wales. His *History* incorporates the legendary heroes of the British Isles as well as heroes of antiquity; for example, it asserts that the British people, like the Romans, were founded by a refugee from the Trojan War—in this case, Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas.

**Hesiod** (fl. c. 700 B.C.): Greek poet, contemporary of Homer, who is primarily known for two works: the *Theogeny* and *Works and Days*. The *Theogeny* is a sort of biography of the Greek gods, which he undertook, according to the poem, at the behest of the Muses. It also contains an account of the creation of the world. *Works and Days* is an elegy to a lost golden age of mankind and a testimony to the ultimate triumph of justice. Although somewhat gloomier in outlook than Homer and less commonly read today, he was renowned in his own time and was a remarkable talent.

**Homer** (fl. 9<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.): Author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Very little is known about this greatest of ancient Greek poets. Claims abound as to his birthplace, but he was most likely from Smyrna, an area of western Anatolia (Turkey) south of Troy, or the island of Chios, just off the Anatolian coast; the details in the poems indicate familiarity with the geography around Troy and the western Aegean. The belief that he was blind is based on his name, which, depending on the language and dialect one consults, might be

derived from the word for “blind,” but it also might mean “one who follows” (i.e., a wandering minstrel) or “he who fits the song together.” The quality and beauty of Homer’s language, as well as his detailed descriptions of the lifestyles of warriors and kings, imply that he was somehow connected with the Greek rulers of his day, perhaps as a court poet.

**Houston, Sam** (1793–1863): First president of the Republic of Texas. As a youth, Houston spent three years living among the Cherokee and, although he helped the U.S. government relocate them to the Arkansas Territory, he also testified to U.S. Congress about abuses perpetrated against them by government agents. He first went to Texas to negotiate a treaty between the United States and Mexico in 1832, then settled there permanently a year later to help the movement for independence. Twice president of the republic, he helped ease the way for Texas to join the United States. Later, as governor of the state of Texas, he was deposed when he refused to support secession from the Union.

**Hrebeljanovic, Lazar** (1329–1389): Serbian prince (*knez*) who led his people against the Ottoman at the Battle of Kosovo. He is revered as a saint in the Serbian Orthodox church and, while he never used this title in life, is known as Tsar (“Caesar” or “Emperor”) Lazar in Serbian folklore. The actual tsar of the Serbians during the Ottoman and Hungarian expansions of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Stefan Uros V, was a weak and ineffectual leader; Lazar was a sort of first-among-equals of the Serbian nobility.

**Ingstad, Anne Stine** (1918–1997): Norwegian archaeologist who headed the digs at L’Anse aux Meadows, Canada, that proved the existence of long-term Viking settlement in North America in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. She was the wife of Helge Marcus Ingstad, an explorer and writer whose passion for the Norse sagas inspired both of them to make the discovery of Vinland their life’s work. Although her husband often gets the lion’s share of the credit for the discovery at L’Anse aux Meadows, Mrs. Ingstad’s archaeological expertise was vital for the day-to-day work of uncovering, cataloging, and preserving this remarkable site.

**Ingstad, Helge Marcus** (1899–2001): Norwegian writer and adventurer who—with the help of his wife, archaeologist Anne Stine Ingstad—

discovered the first definitive proof of long-term Viking settlement in the New World some 500 years before Columbus's voyage. Educated as a lawyer but entirely self-taught in the discipline that became his life's work, his biography often reads like a classic hero's quest: a talented young man abandoning his comfortable existence in his homeland in search of glory and treasure—in this case, intellectual treasure. Even Ingstad's extraordinarily long life (he lived to 101) recalls the heroes of his beloved Norse sagas, those myths in which his life's work revealed the kernel of historical truth.

**Jackson, Andrew** (1767–1845): American soldier and seventh president of the United States. Lionized for his victory over the British at New Orleans in 1815, Jackson was denied the presidency through the “corrupt bargain” of 1824 but was elected in 1828 and 1832 and pursued aggressive policies against the Second Bank of the United States, the Cherokee Indians, and southern threats of nullification of federal legislation.

**Livy** (a.k.a. **Titus Livius**; 59 B.C.–A.D. 17): Roman historian—the great historian of the Roman Republic. He wrote his history “from the founding of the city.” This undertaking was inspired by Augustus, with whom he was on friendly terms. Livy wrote of the glory days of Rome, bringing his narrative down to his own day. His history was part of Augustus's program, including the appearance of independence, as when Livy praised Pompey and Brutus. As did Vergil, Livy became a classic, shaping all subsequent understanding of the history of the Roman Republic. His high reputation in later centuries is shown by Dante's reference to “Livy, who does not err.”

**Malory, Thomas** (fl. late 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D.): English writer of uncertain identity who composed *Le Morte d'Arthur*, one of the best-known treatments of the legends of King Arthur and Camelot. The few clues available to his identity are that he was a knight during the War of the Roses and a prisoner while he composed *Morte*, leading many scholars to believe he is Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, serving the Lancastrian earl of Warwickshire, Richard Beauchamp. The catalog of this Malory's alleged unpleasant exploits (among them theft, assault, kidnapping, and rape) are strangely at odds with the values espoused in his writings, leading some to doubt this is the right Thomas Malory and others to suggest *Morte* was written during a period of mature reflection and remorse.



**Minos** (dates unknown): Legendary king of Crete. In mythology, he was the son of Europa and Zeus. His wife, Pasiphae, became enamored of a bull and brought forth the Minotaur, half man and half bull. To conceal his stepson, Minos built the Labyrinth. According to the historian Thucydides, Minos was ruler of a large naval empire who exacted tribute from Athens. Knossos was his capital, and thus Minos has been associated with the great palace complex discovered there by Sir Arthur Evans, who gave the name Minoan to the Bronze Age civilization of Crete.

**Murad I** (c. 1326–1389): Ottoman sultan who greatly expanded the borders of the empire, particularly into modern-day Turkey and the Balkans. Pope Urban V called a crusade against him in 1365, but the Christian forces were unable to stop his progress into Europe. He is credited with creating the Janissary corps, an elite fighting unit consisting of men who were taken from Christian territories as young boys, converted to Islam, and raised in a strict environment to be perfect soldiers.

**Philip II** (a.k.a. **Philip of Macedon**; 382–336 B.C.): The 18<sup>th</sup> king of ancient Macedonia (r. 359–336 B.C.) and father of Alexander the Great. While his accomplishments are often overshadowed by his son's, he worked a tremendous transformation in the Greek world that laid the groundwork for Alexander's empire building. By a mixture of diplomacy and warfare, he raised Macedonia to the first position among Greek states; from that point on, Greece (including Athens) would be ruled by monarchs, rather than democratic or oligarchic assemblies. Alexander's plans to unite the Greek world and to conquer Persia were an outgrowth of Philip's own ambitions, which were cut short by his assassination.

**Plato** (c. 428–348 B.C.): Athenian philosopher regarded as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, philosophers of antiquity. Born of a noble Athenian family, he became the disciple of Socrates. His early and middle dialogues provide a wealth of information on the intellectual life of Athens in the later 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as well as Socrates's career. After Socrates was executed in 399 B.C., Plato traveled though Greece, Egypt, and Magna Graecia (the southern Italian Greek colonies). He founded the Academy at Athens, which counted Aristotle among its students.

**Plutarch** (A.D. 46—c. 119): Roman biographer and essayist. Plutarch was a Roman citizen from a wealthy family in the Greek city of Chaeronea. He had an excellent education and traveled widely, spending considerable time living and lecturing in Rome, but he preferred to live in his home city. He was well connected in governing circles and was respected and rewarded by the emperors Trajan and Hadrian; he was priest of Apollo at Delphi and played a significant role in the revival of the oracle under these rulers. His *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* was written in illustration of the ideal that Greece and Rome were joined together in a common mission of civilization, an idea that reflected the official view of emperors from Augustus onward.

**Sargon** (fl. 23<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.): Ancient Mesopotamian ruler who consolidated the first empire in the Fertile Crescent. No documents survive from his lifetime, and his capital city, known as Agade, was destroyed and never rediscovered. According to myth, his life story is much like Moses's—a foundling discovered floating in a basket on a river, but this time raised by a gardener, not a princess. He somehow became the cupbearer to the local king, then advisor and military leader, then king by strength of arms. He was wise enough, however, to stabilize his realm with wealth, establishing and encouraging a trade network that may have stretched from Greece to India. Sumerian myths go on to attribute the collapse of his 56-year rule (as they attribute the collapse of every king's rule) to acts of sacrilege.

**Sin-leqi-unninni** (fl. 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.): Babylonian poet and author of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Little is known of this poet who wrote the most enduring version of the life of the great god-king of Uruk, known as the 12 Tablet Poem. The most notable feature of Sin-leqi-unninni's account of Gilgamesh is that it emphasizes his humanity over his divinity, his suffering and struggles over his great works. As such, it was arguably a model for all subsequent heroic literature.

**Socrates** (469–399 B.C.): Athenian philosopher and mentor to Plato who developed the *elenchus*, a rigorous method of dissecting the arguments of others. He had served in the Athenian army as a hoplite and was a member of the Council of Five Hundred, which prepared the agenda for Athens's democratic Assembly. He was tried and executed on charges of impiety and corrupting Athenian youth, as described by Plato and Xenophon. His

calm acceptance of death, as described by Plato in the *Phaedo*, served as an inspiration throughout antiquity.

**Solon** (c. 630–c. 560 B.C.): Athenian statesman and author of the Athenian democracy. Originally a successful merchant, Solon was elected governor, or archon, of Athens in 594 B.C. in the wake of an economic crisis. He refused to become a dictator, however, declaring that he would solve the current problems and then step down. He created a written constitution for Athens, establishing a balanced democracy in which all adult male citizens were granted the right to vote, to serve on juries, and to bring legal actions against others. The right to hold office was reserved for the wealthiest Athenians. Solon also established a supreme court that had the power to declare laws unconstitutional. Solon then declared that the laws should not be changed for 10 years and, true to his word, retired from office and left Athens.

**Sophocles** (496–406 B.C.): Along with Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles was one of the three most important writers of Athenian tragedy. In his plays, including *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, Sophocles probed some of the deepest questions of any era: the limits of human knowledge, free will versus fate, liberation from sin, the duties of a citizen to country and to the gods, and the relationship among liberty, religion, and morality.

**Tacitus** (a.k.a. **Publius Cornelius Tacitus**; A.D. 56–c. 120): Roman historian and public official. His first published works were the *Agricola*, a biography of his father-in-law, who had been a governor of Roman Britain, and the *Germania*, an account of the German peoples of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D. His driving passion in these and all his later works was to show the people of Rome how they had fallen from their virtuous past, usually by contrasting them with other times and other peoples.

**Tolkien, J. R. R.** (1892–1973): Oxford University English professor and fantasy writer who was among the first critics to champion *Beowulf* as a literary masterpiece. His own heroic epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, became one of the top-selling publications in Western history. Tolkien is often credited with creating the high fantasy genre—novels and stories set in a magical version of medieval British or Scandinavian culture, usually featuring a

quest narrative as the main plot. Although as in many other literary forms, many late 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors began to deconstruct high fantasy's cultural assumptions, many others have sided with Tolkien and the classic warrior values his novels endorse.

**Ventris, Michael** (1922–1956): British architect turned cryptographer who deciphered the Linear B script of the ancient Minoans. Inspired by a lifelong love of classical civilization and a speech by Sir Arthur Evans he attended when he was only 14, he became determined to solve the great puzzle of the Minoan language. At 18, he was already publishing his theories in peer-reviewed archaeology journals, but he did not begin his work in earnest until after his service in the Royal Air Force during World War II. He and his collaborator, linguist John Chadwick, first published their brilliant work in a journal paper in 1953; their book-length treatment of the subject, *The Decipherment of Linear B*, was published a few weeks after Ventris's tragic early death in a car crash.

**Vergil** (a.k.a. **Publius Vergilius Maro**; 70–19 B.C.): Roman poet and author of the *Aeneid*, arguably the most influential work of literature from classical antiquity. His father came from humble circumstances but acquired land and some wealth, so Vergil received an excellent education, studying rhetoric and philosophy in Rome. Vergil's first major work of poetry, the *Eclogues*, is a collection of short pastoral poems based on the poetic models of Hellenistic Greece; the *Aeneid* is quite different, a heroic epic recounting the founding of Rome, probably written at the behest of Augustus. Vergil's contemporaries recognized the poem as a classic, and such was its influence in later antiquity and the Middle Ages that the popular imagination turned Vergil into a proto-Christian and a magician.

**Washington, George** (1732–1799): American soldier and statesman and first president of the United States of America (1789–1797). Washington proved his bravery and capability as a soldier during the French and Indian War (1756–1763). His ability as a surveyor and farmer, as well as his marriage, made Washington, at the outbreak of the Revolution, one of the wealthiest men in America. Like other wealthy patriots, Washington had far more to lose than to gain materially by the Revolution. He chose, however, to follow his honor, conscience, and love of liberty. His skills as a general

have been much underrated. His ability in tactics, strategy, logistics, and battlefield command led the Continental Army to victory. His sense of public duty guided him to assume a critical role in framing the Constitution and to serve as president. As president, he established precedents that set a course of liberty under law for the new republic.

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*Note:* I have sought to recommend books and articles that I thought best put our discussion in a broader context and works that I find most helpful and clear. This means that I have frequently recommended older, more traditional books, most of which are available as more recent reprints. I have also followed Lord Acton, the great British historian of liberty, and his dictum that it is the mark of an educated person to read books with which he or she disagrees. Thus, I have frequently recommended books that disagree with me because I find these most stimulating.

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